

ANNEXED

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Abstract

Annexed is a story of lgbt love in a future United States where the government has reinstated slavery to deal with homelessness. It translate history into science fiction and romance with a look specifically at social issues and how they continue to affect times that come after their death. This book is written for all and will hopefully reach many readers in a significant way.

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Critical Introduction

“What happens when the meaningful stories of our place and belonging are denied to us, and how, through their returning, we can knit the jagged edges of our histories across the woundings of time, space, and experience”

— Daniel Heath Justice, *Why Indigenous Literature Matters*

“That’s the problem with history, we like to think it’s a book—that we can turn the page and move the fuck on. But history isn’t the paper it’s printed on. It’s memory, and memory is time, emotions, and song. History is the things that stay with you.”

— Paul Beatty, *The Sellout*

I’ve lived my whole life in cities with busses, and these busses became a freedom for me. I rode the schoolbus, where I would watch houses go by and wonder what the people inside were like. What did they like to eat? What was their favorite color? What did they worry about at night? Bus rides always gave me time to think about stories, since I never developed a way to write or read in moving vehicles without the motion sickness. And it’s precisely on the number thirteen bus in Honolulu that I came up with the idea for *Annexed*.

Sitting there on the bus, headphones in, I was trying to come up with a love story. I wanted to write a story where one party would be saddled with helping the other party fall in love, but in the end the two people would fall for each other. I had planned on just writing something short and cute for my fanfiction account on Archive of Our Own, but it was the binding force that moved this out of the short story realm and into that of the novel.

In the bus, I sorted through a possible reason why these two people would be bound. Magic? Perhaps, but I was already working so much with magic at the time that I was bored of it. A dare? That would change the age dynamic of what I felt like working on. A curse?

Slavery is a kind of curse, I remember thinking to myself. I had been reading *Uncle Tom's Cabin* for a class on the American Renaissance, so slavery was on my mind quite a bit. At the time, I thought that I was headed for a useless tangent, so I put a pause on my musing and began to look out of the window.

The bus turned and I was met with the park between Kapahulu Avenue and Kaimuki High school. Everytime I went by, I saw a community of houseless people set up in tents. Honolulu has one of the highest rates of houselessness in the United States, making this sight of tent and tarp communities quite common. As we passed by, I asked myself again as I often did: *What's going to happen to them?*

At this point in my life, after twenty four years of experience with racism, sexism, cissexism, homophobia, classism, and discrimination from neurotypical people, I had a pretty bleak outlook on life. Although I consider myself a pessimistic optimist, I still found myself asking the question: *What if they sell them as slaves?*

What came next was an image of Trump at a podium in an ill-fitting suit with his wispy corn hair, yelling "The Homeless? Let's just sell 'em," while waving a tiny hand.

And the whole novel was plotted within the next four hours. It became an almost physical struggle to keep from working on it. I had already been working on a thesis about Mexican witches, but I found myself coming back to this project. I started to give it a world with laws and terms and slang and economies and transportation. It had characters from all over, with insights into different cultures and histories. Not only that, but the characters had various sexualities and

had knowledge of love and surviving within a heteronormative society. It also had standard Sci-fi elements like new technology and an element of dehumanization as a social commentary. The whole thing would be wrapped together with a look into how various cultures and communities interact and how we can work together to make a better world, and would come from alternating first person points of view of the two destined lovers.

This initial creation of *Annexed* is quite important as it shows how the story idea occurred, but more importantly for this essay, it maps for us the intentions and reasoning behind much of the novel. The story began with a goal of romance in mind, then came the world informed by history, and the world informed by the troubles of today and the land where the idea was formed. Above all, the characters were the true origin of the story.

This story is technically a fanfiction piece, as its characters were modelled after those in the 2017 *Saban's Power Rangers* movie. In fact the whole thesis was first drafted using the names of characters in the *Power Rangers* movie. This movie is significant for me as it showcases a Latina, and specifically Mexican, superhero who is also questioning her sexuality. As a closeted Bisexual Mexican girl myself, it was the first time I ever saw someone like me in a superhero movie or in any movie quite frankly. There is also chemistry between this character, Trini the yellow ranger, and her teammate, Kimberly the pink ranger, who is also of color, specifically Gujarati Indian. I had never seen two women of color together in a movie, so I began to obsessively write fanfiction stories about the two after that fateful day, March 24th, 2017. They remained in my thesis, but changed into my own characters with the new names City and Rosalie. The two protagonists are not the only characters of color in the story. Of the twenty-five named or recurring characters, only four are white (one of which is also very culturally French as a wave to the twenty different French teachers I've had in my life). The other races and

ethnicities in the story include Mexican, Indian, Shoshone, Vietnamese, Black (one character is specifically Vietnamese and Black), Chinese, Japanese, Kanaka Ma'oli, and Puerto Rican.

It is important to have a wide variety of diverse characters, because it's rare to see how people of color interact with each other in American media. Oftentimes, shows and books with people of color only show one race of people who often interact with white people. In *Fresh Off the Boat*, it's mostly Chinese people interacting with white people. In *One Day at a Time*, it's only Cubans interacting with white people. These shows are helpful for white people to learn about other cultures and for the specific cultures to feel represented. Rarely, however, do we see various non-white races interacting. I have found that this has the negative effect of people of color being racist toward each other without realizing it.

Before diving into the relationships of various people of color, it is important to establish an understanding of the ways I conceive of race and its tangled relationship with Whiteness. Whiteness itself is contingent upon racism for it to function, as it even required its own people to give up their indigenous cultures for the promise of capitalistic power. Thus a white code is established in order to function in capitalistic and colonial societies. This white code exists in dominant languages, often those from Europe, as well as in modes of behavior, and in commonly understood histories often produced in textbooks. For this project, I focused on American White codes where English is the dominant language, the primary code of behavior is polite and without disrupting the norm, and the white-centered, white apologist American history. I wanted to complicate this notion of the white code as it relates to people of color. Often people of color are seen to exist beyond the white code as though we only use it when dealing with white people or in white spaces. I try to problematize that notion in mind. Using a white cultural code is a problematic necessity; it is filled with the stereotypes of American media, textbooks, and society,

but it is the code we have all been forced to learn, thus the most accessible. We end up knowing only white codes of behavior and our own culture's code of conduct. This centers Whiteness as a mutual code for various races to communicate. I wanted to complicate this notion in *Annexed* and present a wide variety of ethnicities interacting in order to present cohabitation with and without Whiteness.

This work took on an almost collaborative nature through my discussions in the course of my research. Many friends, in some way or another, contributed to the world building. I talked to my friend and future lawyer, Kaitlyn Iwashita, while she was taking an Indigenous law course and she pointed me to the Indian Child Welfare Act. This act allowed the American government to take indigenous children from their families and put them into boarding schools so they could assimilate into the same white code, as mentioned above. This influenced my work on the “annexed living artifacts (ALA)” featured in Chapters 12 and 13. In Chapter 12, Thomas Crawford, best-friend of Rosalie Hart, was raised to become an “ALA” until they were adopted by Rita Crawford, ex-annexed person of the powerful Gordon Family. In Chapter 13, Rose also mentions seeing ALAs in the Observatory as a child and how Tommy critiqued how their presence in a museum was used in order to sell an image. The Indian Child Welfare Act, here, is changed so Indigenous children are taught about their own culture until they are bought by museums to work as artifacts. I twisted the history of boarding schools to take on a kind of benevolence that is not quite genuine. Tommy and City talk about this over lunch. Tommy explains,

“They’d learn about their stories, practices, rituals all with government funding into research and everything. In exchange they would work for museums, national parks, Boy Scout camps, and all that, just teaching people about themselves. It

was originally just for kids, soon though, anyone on the Rez was fair game. And as our numbers drop so did the amount of land we were allowed to keep.”

“So they basically screwed you guys over by pretending to help you out.”

[City said.]

“Yeah, pretty much happens all the time.” (Harrison 105)

I also consulted Writing Center director, John Gagnon, who was formerly a practicing lawyer, and asked him about not only my laws, but also about the rhetoric that surrounded them. He found the term “annexed” to be a hard sell to the masses. He said that most laws have a sophistication in their naming and are neat little acronyms and mentioned that “Homeless Annexation Law” didn’t have the same ring to it. He said that the law had to be appealing to voters in order for them to remember it easily and vote for it. He cited the DREAM Act as an example. The Dream Act is a protective act for undocumented immigrant children, but the acronym stands for Development, Relief, and Education for Alien Minors Act. “Alien” is not the best word to use if one wants to be politically correct, so I took that into consideration when I was naming things. It needed to be musical enough to make up for any minorly offensive words. John Gagnon also mentioned how the word “annexation” was difficult to sell because it “territorialized homeless people.” I decided to keep it specifically for that reason: because of the western equation of land to resources and this new equation of people to land and thus resources. That word would encompass the way people of color are already viewed as expendable resources.

I also consulted Nandini Chandra about Rosalie Hart’s identity as a half Gujarati woman. Before even conceptualizing this thesis, I was reading the novel *Erotic Stories for Punjabi Widows* by Balli Kaur Jaswal, which is about a creative writing teacher in London working to

teach elderly women to write, but more so to tell their own stories. I considered making Rose Punjabi, but I instead modeled her off Naomi Scott, who played the Pink Power Ranger, and who identifies as Gujarati and Scottish. What I did take from the novel was a better understanding of mixed Indian and British identity. I used this as a basis for Ishita Hart, who speaks in a received pronunciation accent. After having the two characters mostly fleshed out, I went to Professor Chandra for help. I wanted to check that Rose's family's motivations could be in line culturally and that I wasn't making any stereotypical or disrespectful decisions when writing them. We covered Hinduism, the caste system, Sanskritization, and Gujarati history and culture in our conversation. It was incredibly informative and made me interested in learning more about India. What I latched onto most for my thesis, however was the concept of Sanskritization. Professor Chandra lead me to M.N. Srinivars' *A Note on Sanskritization and Westernization* where he explains the concept:

“The caste system is far from a rigid system in which the position of each component caste is fixed for all time. Movement has always been possible, and especially so in the middle regions of the hierarchy. A low caste was able, in a generation or two, to rise to a higher position in the hierarchy by adopting vegetarianism and teetotalism, and by Sanskritizing its ritual and pantheon. In short, it took over, as far as possible, the customs, rites, and beliefs of the Brahmins, and the adoption of the Brahminic way of life by a low caste seems to have been frequent, though theoretically forbidden. This process has been called "San- skritization" in this book, in preference to "Brahminization," as certain Vedic rites are confined to the Brahmins and the two other "twice-born" castes.”
(481).

I was particularly interested in the concept as it leads to upward mobility through behavioural changes and the idea that it takes several generations. I put this into Rosalie's family's backstory. Rose was being pushed to perfection by Ishita because she had been pushed similarly by her parents who had been urged to do the same. Professor Chandra also mentioned how important education is in this regard, which I found to be helpful in Ishita's backstory since she was pushed to be a great student and especially mathematician. These aspects of their lives are hinted at in Chapter 15, when Rose discusses her family with City and they consider how Rose's parents may affect her idea of love.

In addition to semi-formal interviews, I spoke with other dedicated graduate students from various fields whom I encountered in casual conversations about my thesis. One of my regular writing center clients was working on her thesis about e-governments which made its way into my thesis in Chapter 31. She was studying the concept of "workarounds" which allow people to complete bureaucratic tasks by working around the system in certain steps. This concept helps people learn alternative modes of gaining information and exploring other less formal resources, but it allows a dysfunctional system to continue. Though the term "e-government" is only mentioned once by Thomas, the concept of workarounds has stuck with me and has helped me conceptualize not only bureaucracy and government, but also capitalism which informed and strengthened the underlying theme of anti-capitalism in my thesis. There was also one night I made friends with Economics students who complimented me on writing a story that would be fascinating to study from an economic lens and asked me how my law combatted the rise of indentured servitude. It was from there that I conceived of the restrictions needed to free someone as mentioned in Chapter 1 and 20: giving the annexed person an income, setting them up with a housing situation, and getting them employed. I will be forever grateful

for those three Economics students who came to sit with us that night, because they helped strengthen my plot and world-building.

More than anyone, however, I collaborated with PhD student Tina Togafau. We spent countless hours discussing characters and their long back stories. I have most every character's life mapped out in several notebooks, so I can make sure their motivations are clear and in character. Tina was also crucial to the development of the thesis as they are, like Tommy Crawford, Shoshone and two-spirit. Despite the fact that I am Blackfoot, I don't know enough about my people to be able to write them adequately, but Tina knows much more about their heritage and helped me to create Rita and Tommy, who are both Shoshone. Tina also helped me with tweaking my laws to fit the context of Hawai'i. The ALAs mentioned above were changed in the Hawaiian context to become the ACAs, Annexed Cultural Ambassadors. Both had the same function of teaching non-indigenous Americans about indigenous lands and cultures, but ACAs took on a more touristic role. Where ALAs work in nonprofit and government buildings as educational resources, ACAs also perform in hotels, shopping centers and other explicitly for-profit establishments. This is what the little-girl-in-pigtails from Rose's memories in Chapter 13 is being trained to do when she calls out Tommy's casual racism. About Hawai'i specifically, I also talked with Leilani Portillo, who is Native Hawaiian and has studied in the Pacific longer than I have about the ways houselessness is conceived of differently than homelessness. She said that houselessness is an acknowledgement of land as an ancestor, thus living on the land is a way of connecting with family and taking care of it rather than feeding into capitalism by buying a home. This is made clear in Chapter 25 when Rose explains it to City as they overlook the beach on their last night in Honolulu. It was very helpful to have Tina as a wiser soundboard who could tell me when there was a more effective way of writing or if I was missing a key element in my

writing and help me to restructure parts of the story. All of my consultations were integral to writing accurate characters and I will forever thank those who helped me.

As I mentioned before, racially diverse characters are also important for me because humans decided at some point to invent the concept of races, which came with consequences ranging from trauma to death. Anything that involves people involves race, as we all have a race. This also influences stories and how they are created. There is, in fact, a sweet version of my thesis that has already been published. *A Marriage of Unconvenience* by Chelsea M. Cameron is about two twenty-three-year-old white girls who get married so the protagonist can get her trust-fund and pay for her new wife to go to Graduate School. The two move in together and unwittingly fall for each other over the course of twenty four chapters and finally confess their feelings in chapter twenty. I discovered this book a few months after I began drafting my thesis and began using it as a kind of guide. It was a white coloring page that I colored in, occasionally redefining the image on the page to match the new colors. Introducing race and history into the story made for something quite different than Cameron's story.

This brings us to another reasoning for requiring racially diverse characters: there are not enough queer characters of color in American media. Of the twenty five characters in my thesis, sixteen are some variation of queer. In many TV shows, which in my youth were my primary source of stories, if there is a queer character, they are typically white. Not ever seeing any queer Latina girls was probably one of the reasons why I didn't realize I was Bisexual until I was nineteen and didn't come out until I was twenty-three. I wanted simply to show other queer people of color that they weren't alone and that this process of self-discovery as it relates to sexuality has no age limit, but more than that I wanted to explore the intersection of race and queerness.

A Marriage of Unconvenience is in essence my thesis had race and history been ignored. There is no threat to safety. No care in the world. No reason to think about the past. No need to explain their existence. Whiteness affords queer people homonormativity, which allows white LGB people to exist in society with less persecution than queer people of color and trans people of any race. With this story, I wanted to resituate queerness in its historical context which has always included people of color. It's for this reason that the historical aspects of the thesis are so crucial and why they build the world of *Annexed*.

Annexed is a work of translation. Translation of history into genre by taking things that have already happened and presenting them in a new light so that we may look at them differently, in this case in science fiction. Perhaps in presenting historical events and laws in a new context, we may feel a new connection to them, thus we may be able to work to avoid such a future. This process was quite simple for me as it is the way I learn best. Since the age of six, I have been trilingual, learning my home language, Spanish, at two, my social language, English, at four, and my academic language, French, at five. I often struggled to understand what words meant and used knowledge from the other languages to understand. This became my primary mode of learning: I apply a concept from one subject and to a completely different subject. I was translating for meaning. So translating history into genre for me seemed most logical and flowed easily.

All of the year 2099 in *Annexed* is derived from a law or social custom that has been used in American history or is currently being practiced. Slavery, annexation, the commodification of indigenous cultures, homophobia, mistreatment of the homeless, the displacement of indigenous people, broken land treaties, gentrification, mistreatment and murder of the neurodivergent, the exploitation of people of color in the country, on American territories, and in the occupied

kingdom of Hawai‘i, the wide scale violence of capitalism and militarism on people of color as well as other issues in the long list of American atrocities, are all renamed and represented in this book.

This was when the critical analyst in me stepped in. I have always been neurotic with my world building so that I don't fall back on any assumptions held by humans in this society. I always reminded myself of this with the Vulcans, Romulans, Klingons, Orions, Andorians, etc in *Star Trek*. There is only ever one character design for a whole planet and often they are white with different facial features such as Vulcans who were simply white people with pointed eyebrows and ears. This is when we can see the underlying racism of the oh-so diverse Star Trek. The producers saw other races as the other and decorated their exotic characters in the same light. There was no problem for the white producers who would also prefer to imagine the earth with only one race too. This is where Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's Ted Talk "The Danger of the Single Story" is reflected most easily. Adichie stated that if we get only a single story from various races, those races become Other and homogenous. This concept stuck with me and I promised I would not let these assumptions go unchecked in my work. I would not let my world-building fall easily onto assumptions built by single-stories, instead I would build my world critically so it had clear and insidious origins as though there was never any interaction with humans. With *Annexed*, ironically, I didn't have to do as much work in this regard as I was already working with American history as my basis, thus the main social assumptions would be built into the world. Despite that fact, I wanted to make sure I was conscious of those assumptions as I built the world. Not only did I research with my peers and with books, I also made sure to critically analyze their presentation and any biases that may have come from the sources.

My study of history has been going on for quite a while. I have been gathering history and mapping out timelines in my mind. Which is to say I've been listening to people's stories about their families and land and taking note of them as an extracurricular activity. I've been doing this since my sophomore year in my undergraduate education, when I realized that it is the gaps in history that help make racism insidious. From then I listened to as many people of color as I could. I took an African American Literature course to learn about slavery and black voices. It was then that I studied my great aunt, Zora Neale Hurston, as well as other authors like James Baldwin, Frederick Douglass, and Sojourner Truth. After that class ended, I spent time listening at the Black Self Empowerment Organization and working with the Multicultural Fusion club on campus to learn about my friends' cultural history as well as their perspectives of American history and to learn about their own experiences being people of color in an institution in Cedar Rapids, Iowa. I learned to know when to listen and when to speak, and most importantly that others' responses were more important than the questions that prompted them. From there I started to learn the history about my own culture in a Sociology course about memory and symbols. It was the first time I studied my own people and I read about Chicano history. I wrote an eighteen page paper detailing the small symbols of memory imbedded into our clothing which required me learning about Mexican clothing from the PreColonial era until 2016. It was then that I learned about the Chicano Rights movement, about the Zoot Suit Riots, about Mexican segregation, our inability to vote until the 1960s, among other historical moments that took place in Los Angeles and San Diego. I was drawn most to the Zoot Suit Riots which found its way into my thesis through Belle, Ishita Hart's Mexican annexed woman, who alludes to them in Chapter 4. I was most captivated by the idea of girls who wore Zoot Suits which was quite common, as detailed in *The Woman in the Zoot Suit* by Catherine Sue Ramirez. The book discussed how this

act created a queer identity that the white sailors had trouble comprehending and may have been a factor in the Riots. This act of women wearing Zoot Suits keeps recurring in my short stories about history and served as an influence for City's choice in clothing as a more masculine, Mexican lesbian.

In my opinion the United States has not learned from its mistakes and crimes against humanity, so I felt it was right to place the bloody truth back in the hands of Americans in a way that they'd appreciate and read. What better way to do so than to present it in both romance and science fiction.

Science fiction has had a long history of social commentary, but often the canonical white science fiction literature is not explicit enough in its metaphors, thus racism and colonialism are ignored as the apocalypse that has already occurred. Daniel Heath Justice, in his book, *Why Indigenous Literature Matters*, states, "Our apocalypse isn't a singular event, it's an ongoing and relentless process, not unlike settler colonialism itself [...] Our stories affirm [...] hope, most often by exploring kinship" (168). I wanted to keep this in mind as I worked on my project. That the future would only be an aftershock of the horrors of before and not the big rift we've been taught to fear. And perhaps in that we could find kinship with others who had been hurt in that same apocalypse.

SciFi is not entirely white, however. In the very monochromatic institution of Coe College, I was guided by my Cameroonian American fiction workshop professor to Octavia Butler. It was in her writing that I realized for the first time all the things speculative fiction and science fiction could do. This genre was actually built quite well for discussions of race and other societal markers. Following in her footsteps, I added racism to my science fiction to make my metaphor a bit more explicit. *Kindred*, which I read after graduating from Coe, was more

globally inspirational as it was the work that really drove me to mix history with science fiction elements such as time travel. It gave me the confidence that I wouldn't be regarded as unliterary or indecisive in my genre choices.

Where *Kindred* had more of an effect on my confidence as a writer, it was "Bloodchild" that was a guiding force in this thesis. "Bloodchild" is one of my favorite short stories of all times, and is the story of a Terran boy, Gan, who is the chosen mate of, T'Gatoi, an alien with various limbs. Gan witnesses a birth gone-wrong and begins to question if he wants to go through with the process with T'Gatoi. While Gan is questioning his decision, his brother tells him, "You're not [T'Gatoi]. You're just her property" (Kindle Loc. 244). He decides to go through with it, partially to spare his sister and partially because he doesn't want her with anyone else. The story ends with an assurance from T'Gatoi that she will protect him. The most curious part of the story comes more from Butler's afterword. She opens the afterword with this, "It amazes me that some people have seen 'Bloodchild' as a story of slavery. It's not. It's a number of things, though. On one level, it's a love story between two very different beings," (Kindle Loc. 406). Perhaps, it's not intended as a slavery story, but the romantic relationship is nonetheless complicated and problematic. The same can be said of Rose and City's relationship. Both end the same way, with one party vowing to protect the party with less agency or power, who also goes willingly to the former party. Where Octavia Butler seems quite keen on the romantic nature of her story, I'm not certain about mine, though I do still call *Annexed* a love story. I transferred this uncertainty to both City and Rose in a few ways. With Rose, the process is more simplistic as she avoids her feelings then works immediately to mediate the problematic nature of the potential relationship. With City the process is more complicated and more directly related to the way I handled my feelings about the whole thing. City first believes she could

never fall for someone who annexed her, but as those feelings come up, she decides not to deal with them since she knows a relationship could never bloom. In that, she allows herself to dream, to fantasize about being with her captor. As a teenager, I used to fantasize about being kidnapped so I could be anywhere but my one bedroom apartment with my four-person family, in a neighborhood with no friends and not enough books. I was enthralled by the premise in *Beauty and the Beast*, where Belle gets kidnapped and is given a giant library. I also had a huge crush on the Phantom of the Opera who would sing with Christine and loved her so much that he would kill for her. At the time, a kidnapping was an escape for me, which found its way into City's conceptualization of what was happening. After all, Rose is beautiful, kind, rich, and protects her; she's easy to fall for. Does this excuse what is happening? It shouldn't if it does, which is why I spent a long time on the development of their relationship in an attempt to give them a sense of balance.

Science fiction seems to also be marked by its futuristic terms, thus I also decided to be intentional about my terms, especially surrounding "annexation." In my thesis, annexation is the new slavery created to deal with homelessness. I chose the term annexation for several reasons. The first is to highlight the fact that no annexation has ever been legal and that the land that has been annexed is destined to be exploited and the indigenous people of said land are destined for slavery or death. The title also arises from the fact that much of the continental United States does not realize what evil has been caused by the illegal annexation of Hawai'i, and as the land that has housed me for the last two years, I found it appropriate to include and highlight this part of Hawaiian history in my text. The last reason is because of the way that annexation, in American textbooks and in the wider continental consciousness, is seen as an act of kindness rather than a process meant to steal land and resources and to condemn people to a horrible fate

of trauma and death. In the first chapter, the taglines “Annexed into Society,” and “Annexed into your Home” (Harrison 2) are introduced as a marketing scheme to make people feel as though their act of annexing others is one of benevolence. When I have mentioned the premise of my thesis to others, most people drop their heads or shrug and say, “I could actually see that happening.” But there are a few people who looked me dead in the eyes and said, “at least they’d have a place to live.” In the extremely capitalist nature of the United States, homeless people have no worth since they do not produce or work, and the concept of “annexation” is unfortunately easy for some people to swallow. A society that already hates people whom they’ve deemed lazy and crazy see housing people and feeding them as a service to those who tried to run away from daily grind to pay for existing.

Ironically, this world is in the backseat of the story and the romantic story is in the forefront and it is actually quite funny. Humor is, unfortunately or fortunately, a side-effect of historical trauma, as is seen most obviously in *The Sellout* by Paul Beatty. His book is also about resegregating Los Angeles and uses humor to ridicule all of the awful things that have happened in American history. I have been known to use gallows humor in my daily life, so Beatty’s work influenced me easily and I found myself including this kind of humor in my writing of Tommy Crawford and Paris Giang. Both characters are highly educated, but are also highly aware of their own traumas and of their historical trauma so they make jokes. I have often wondered why we do this and admit I haven’t looked for an explanation. However, I suspect it has to do with the fact that this much trauma would emotionally drain us if we didn’t force ourselves to laugh. In this way, humor is an act of surviving, a necessary element in order to get up in the morning. I wanted to include this in my characters because I don’t believe they would survive otherwise. I

also wanted to include this for my readers as they are likely to be people of color and we should not see ourselves only in moments of suffering. We should be allowed to laugh and be happy.

I also decided to include romantic moments in the story, but I tried to deal with the main problematic factor in the relationship: the fact that one owns the other. This a clear power dynamic issue which is why I made certain decisions. The first is in the fact that Rosalie and City do not have sex in the thesis. There is still a power issue at the end of the book, though it is being resolved, so I found it inappropriate to cross that line. I also decided to develop their relationship over the course of twenty-three chapters. It has been dubbed “a long time to wait,” But I found that the problematic nature of the relationship would require a much longer time span, so the characters could make informed decisions about their feelings.

I did, however, decided to include six chapters dedicated mostly to their sweet moments. As mentioned before, Justice cites kinships as a way to affirm hope (168), and this is my reasoning for including these adorable scenes between two queer women of color. Queer women of color suffer so much and these scenes are simply there to be adorable. Similar to humor, love is necessary for dealing with horrors of colonialism. Leanne Betasamosake Simpson’s *Islands of Decolonial Love* opens with several epigraphs, one of which is from a Boston Review interview of Junot Diaz which states:

“The kind of love that I was interested in, that my characters long for intuitively, is the only kind of love that could liberate them from that horrible legacy of colonial violence. I am speaking about decolonial love....Is it possible to love one’s broken-by-the-coloniality-of-power self in another broken-by-the-coloniality-of-power person?” (Diaz qtd. in Simpson).

I went searching for more guidance in the original interview, despite the fact that I have some qualms with Diaz after some accusations surfaced last year. But I was compelled by the sentence that comes right before the second half of the epigraph: “is it possible to overcome the horrible legacy of slavery and find decolonial love?” (Moya). He mentioned that this was the central question of his book *The Brief and Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*, and I believe to a certain extent it’s one of the questions in my book as well. I wanted to complicate the notion of love as many books and films focus more on romantic love or biological familial love. Love in *Annexed* is not only romantic, however. We find love in friendships, family (as in the Crawfords), and found families. Found families are common in queer culture as there are times when we are not accepted by our biological families. I wanted to pay homage to my own found family at the University of Hawai‘i at Manoa with the ending of the story that situates Rita Crawford as a kind of found-mother figure similar to Janelle Monae’s character in *Moonlight*, who is the adoptive mother figure of Chiron, the protagonist. This is just as valid a form of kinship as heteronormative kinship and I wanted to show my support with the inclusion of various forms of love.

Romance itself is quite a large part of my culture. I am a first generation Mexican American (as well as a member of a few other ethnicities), and I grew up predominantly with classic Mexican music in the house. There is no song quite as dramatic and poetic as the Mexican break-up song. I have taken the liberty of translating a few lyrics to iterate my point. One song my mother loved to play titled “Como te Voy Olvidar,” by Los Angeles Azules, has the singer asking (as the title states) how he is supposed to forget the audience. He mentions finding her “in a rose...in each breath...in kissing the cross...in saying a prayer” (Angeles Azules). Another song by a popular rock band with the culturally appropriative name Maná takes

on a more violent and more desperate tone of breaking up, though many of their songs also take on the same religious and flowery lyrics of the first song. In “Arráncame el Corazón,” Maná’s lead singer attempts to call the audience but is met with “Silence on the telephone, I throw it at the wall, I can’t anymore-- I’d prefer if-- If you leave I ask that you please rip my heart out...rip my life out, quickly my love.” The sheer dramatics of Mexican break up songs could fill an essay alone, but that unfortunately is beyond the scope of this paper. But these songs influenced me greatly growing up, to the point that I have a rather skewed idea of what love perhaps should be. It is also from these lyrics that I learned how to write poetry and beautiful sentences. Often break ups are depicted with small things like flowers wilting, with lessons that someone forgot to teach, with a tiny, otherwise insignificant, moment. I tried to imbed this into Rose and City’s relationship, noting the tiny things. Rose clings to City’s charm after City is taken away in Chapter 29 and notices that her shoes are missing from the doorway. City, in turn, notes Rose’s habits and keeps small bits of her close in the form of wearing her socks or clothes throughout the book. I was also influenced by the language in many of these songs. One break up song that is Columbian rather than Mexican that I love is one Shakira wrote at seventeen, entitled *Antologia*, which is particularly beautiful. She explains that the pain still lingers “because all the time, I spent next to you, has left its thread sewn into me./And I learned to take time out of seconds, you made me see the sky more deeply, next to you I think I gained more than three kilos, from all the sweet kisses that you shared with me,” (Shakira, translated by the author). These sentences don’t entirely make sense in English, but they are sweet and beautiful nonetheless. These lyrics are also the origin of a few ideas in the book. Another lyric from “Como te Voy Olvidar” mentions “you nailed yourself here in my heart” which I twisted and inserted into Chapter 8 when City sees Rose in a pink dress and she “decorat[es] the walls of

[her] brain with the image of Rose in this pink dress” (Harrison 65). An earlier draft had City nailing the pictures into her brain, but it was felt by some to be too violent a declaration of love. I reluctantly revised the phrase, but I kept the act of decorating as it continues with the subtle violence of tacks on walls, because I simply couldn’t help myself.

I had trouble with this project specifically, however, because I had to differentiate between the two characters’ points of view in the first person. For this, I developed a system to write them differently. City narrates in a more colloquial and sarcastic way. She often misuses commas and never uses semicolons. She focuses on setting, specifically on exits, and always errs on the side of caution. Rosalie is a bit more unobservant, but she does pay attention to people’s actions, though she may not always interpret them correctly. She narrates in a slightly more sophisticated way and is often grammatically correct. She also writes more anxiously as she has an inkling that something about herself is not quite defined, but she does not realize that that is her sexuality. Looking back, I found I had explored these characters in two projects for two classes at the University of Hawai‘i at Manoa, in a class on noir fiction and a class on intersectional queer theory. The noir class taught by Rodney Morales had the option of a final creative work where we could write a noir story. I wrote one about a queer Mexican girl investigating her brother’s murder in 1946 Los Angeles. I wrote this with the yellow Power Ranger in mind and in first person, which influenced City’s dry and gloomy tone in *Annexed*. The class of intersectional queer theory taught by Cynthia Franklin allowed me to analyze a film from a queer lens as a small project. I analyzed the pink Power Ranger’s storyline in the 2017 film. It was in this project that I learned about the intricacies Naomi Scott had put into the way the ranger reacted to different people around her and how her focus was near constantly on the

yellow ranger. This played into the way that Rose code switches with different people and how she is near constantly keeping in eye out for City throughout the book.

Another major difficulty in writing this thesis is the lack of a human villain. There are several characters who could be seen as the villain of the book such as Jacob Gordon, Tyler Nishikawa, Zack Taylor, the Wranglers, among others, but none have a full arc or are defeated in the end. These decoy villains are only human representatives of the true villain: the structure of society. These days we hear the phrase “the system is broken” in response to social, political, and capitalistic in justice. We hear this phrase in times of police brutality, developments of dangerous pipelines, violence against immigrants coming into the continent, murders of trans women, and freedom given to white men who have murdered people of color. “The system is broken. We need to fix it.” Unfortunately, the system is not broken, but working exactly as it was designed. Since the beginning of white history of America, people of color and our land has been desecrated and exploited--all to secure the socially constructed, capital wealth the settlers are so obsessed with. When this is the foundation upon which the United States was built, it is plain to see that the system was designed to be unfair. Now some cite the civil rights movements and other social justice movements as proof that the United States’ system has improved. However, these movements, though significant and important, cannot rectify the structure that has, for five hundred and twenty seven years to date, deemed people of color as expendable and deemed native land as nothing more than a resource. If we set the civil rights era as twenty years, which showcases the time when these movements were taken seriously in the wider American social consciousness and pit it against all of the time since Columbus stumbled upon the Americas, these efforts take up only 3.8% of said time. Even if we measure all the years from the civil rights movements to now, we have only spent 11% of the time, trying to “fix” things.

The true villain of the story remains equally as undefeated as the decoy villains at the end because the system is too great to be taken down by one group of people or solved by a single twenty-four year old writer. I wrote it this way, in the hopes that we would realize we have to work together and dismantle the true evils of the world: white supremacist, heteropatriarchal capitalism. It is a difficult task, but there are many of us and maybe together we can fix things.

Annexed is a story born out of the mind of a hopeless romantic who has faced years of various forms of oppression, and has decided to dedicate her life to social justice. The book is dedicated to bring well-rounded representations of queer people of color to the world, as well as presenting history and contemporary issues in science fiction form. With the influence of various literatures, songs, and theories, as well as personal experience, I have woven together a love story in a horrible world, one that looks quite a bit like our own. It is my hope that many will see this book as a call to action and work to dismantle the true villain that exists both within and beyond the book. Most importantly, I hope readers will see the hope that also exists within and beyond *Annexed*.

1 Rosalie Hart

I spent three weeks organizing and planning this monthly board meeting all so my mother could step in and lead it anyway. I had made preliminary notes from countless hours of reviewing old board meeting footage and practiced for several hours in front of the mirror and in the conference hall after the workday. I had sent everyone the overview of what I'd be covering and a copy of my visual presentation for them to review a week prior to the meeting. I had even reserved catering for the meeting. But instead of impressing my mother and finally proving that I have what it takes to run this company, here I am sitting in the lobby of Mrs. Warren's Center for Annexed Youth.

"You need someone to help you develop a social life," my mother told me, with my phone in hand as she cleared all fifteen of my work obligations and took over my leadership duties. "Old fashion love takes a lot of work."

My mother, Ishita Hart, is the CEO of Hart to Heart International, the online dating and relationship empire. Using what they've dubbed Romantic Engineering, Hart to Heart has brought forth 68% of all the romantic relationships in the United States and 40% of those in the world this year alone. A three percent increase to last year. And yesterday, without even giving me a warning, she input my information and ran my name through the H2H algorithm. Much to her horror, I generated no match. She tried again and again, until the automatic message told her she'd need to pay to access more Match Searches for the day. So after a few glasses of red wine and maybe three tears, my mother decided that we would have to take a less digital approach.

Apparently there are still eligible bachelors who, for some reason or another, aren't in the database. Many from prominent families, but who have started moving away from the digital and

from the idea that organic love can be calculated. According to my mother, that's the pool we'll be starting from.

But step one is to annex somebody.

I look up from my phone at the mint walls around me with tan wood trim. There are two chairs on either side of me and in front of me is a small reception desk that blocks any entrance or exit from a hallway. The desk is occupied by what looks like a college intern. She's the one who had me sit while I wait for Mr. Quentin Scott to get back from his lunch.

"Wow, you're early," she said, handing me a small handful of pamphlets. "He should be back in about fifteen minutes. Feel free to have a seat."

So, I had. I glance down at my watch. The sparkly hands betray me and reveal only two minutes have passed in the last hour. I look over the three pamphlets in my hands. The first is called *Annexed into Your Home: Caring for Your Annexed Person*. The second is titled *Annexed into Society: Economic and Social Benefits of Annexation*. The last one is the thickest and is more of a booklet than a pamphlet. *Mrs. Warren's Handbook to Healthy Annexation*. I start flipping through and reading. The back of the front cover page has a general history of the Center opposite the small table of contents.

This place has been in business for fifty years, housing and placing annexed children, teens and young adults under twenty six years old in different annexation households. It was started by Meredith Warren in 2049, four years after the Homeless Annexation Law went into effect, because she wanted an alternative Center for children who had less of a choice in their situation. It's a small mom-and-pop business that doesn't practice wide-scale Servitude Therapy, but offers a more comforting approach. There is a historic picture of her standing with two dark children, one in a shirt with a rainbow across the chest. It seems like a boarding school for kids

who've been abandoned. I glance at my own brown skin. I'm only a bit lighter than the boys in the picture.

I turn to the table of contents.

History of Annexation.

Our Philosophy.

Rules and Regulations.

Quality You Can Count On!

Not a Right Fit?

How to Contribute.

Contact.

I spend time flipping through the pamphlets, not reading just looking at the pictures. There aren't many actual children photographed. They're mostly teenagers and young adults who are mostly brown and black with a few lighter faces sprinkled in. Most pictures look at least a few decades old with weird fashion choices and outdated hairstyles. Some I never knew to be in style to begin with. I stop when I find a diagram of the uniforms they use in the building. A range of children are lined up, some in shorts and a t-shirt for summer and some in sweatpants and a hoodie for winter, all with simple black shoes. They are color coded by age range. From zero to five years is red; six to nine is orange; ten to thirteen is yellow, fourteen to seventeen is green; eighteen to twenty is blue; twenty-one to twenty-four is violet; and last, twenty-five is a light grey. After that page all the pictures show these uniforms. Gone are the weird fashions and hairdo's. The boys' hair is cut short and the girls wear their hair tied back in either a ponytail, braid, or bun.

I hear the door open and look up. A man in a red flannel and black tie walks in, scrolling through his phone. He looks up at me through his black sunglasses. He takes them off and replaces them with regular glasses that have the same black frames as the ones before. He points the temple at me before folding it and putting the sunglasses in their case.

“You must be my last-minute meeting,” he says in a cheerful voice that makes it clear he’s joking, but I still feel terrible for being an inconvenience. He reaches for my hand and shakes it. “I’m Quentin Scott. Come on back, I’ll tell you a bit about the place and we’ll talk business,” he says, as he lifts a section of the desk and we walk through.

The hallway is lined with a few doors. A few are left open. I peek as much as I can. The first looks like a small gym. Another looks like a home office combined with a kitchen. Their doors both read Simulation Test Room. We walk past a set of double doors from which come muffled sounds.

“That’s our Recreation Room. It’s good for socializing the annexed children. They’re always monitored for progress in socialization, conflict resolution, emotional control, and physical fitness. All of our staff has been certified by the Alternate Annexation Association of America, which most people know as the Four As, and work a minimum two years under supervision of senior mentors to make sure our annexed children are given the utmost care and are of the highest quality.” He opens the door to a small room with a large desk in front of some book shelves and three seats set up near a wooden door. The man at the desk turns from his computer and smiles and greets us.

“Good lunch, Mr. Scott?” he asks, pushing his round glasses up the bridge of his nose.

“You know it.” He goes to open the door. Inside is a larger office with more shelves, a similar desk and two seats in front of said desk. There is also a window that looks out to a walled

courtyard. There, a couple kids in green and yellow uniforms play a game of basketball. Staff in navy blue polos and dark khakis watch, taking notes on clipboards.

“Have a seat, miss,” he pauses to look at some notes on a desk pad, “Rosalie Hart.” I do and set my bag down after I slip the pamphlets into it.

“Thanks,” I say, though I’m not sure he heard it.

“So I spoke with your mother on the phone,” Mr. Scott says. “Ish...” he struggles with her name as he reads it from the file.

“Ishita,” I say.

“Ishita. I’ve never heard that name before.”

“It’s Indian. I’m half Indian. Gujarati, specifically.”

He nods as he sits in his chair and produces a few documents from a drawer and starts writing on them with a cobalt blue stylus. From the blue glimmer they give off I know they’re Scan Pages. Most documents are printed on them now because they are reusable and their information is uploaded instantly with a pen click. Also made good business for copy-editors, especially since things would only be printed once. Had to be perfect for the future. “She said you needed someone right away.”

I tug the edge of my sleeve in a few directions, trying to figure out what to say. I finally decide on, “That makes sense.”

He smiles. I’m sure he’s heard it all. “Well, we don’t have a specialty here, unless you count age. Our kids are trained in both indoor and outdoor housework. They all have regular schooling, so they’re all literate and numerate. A few stand out in certain areas, but I’m guessing you just need someone young for this job.”

I scratch my cheek. I hadn't thought much about it, but apparently my mother had. I guess it'd be helpful to have someone around my age to help me develop a social life. Can't have a grandma tell you what to wear on a date, now could you? "I suppose it would help, yeah," I admit.

Mr. Scott nods. "Hmm. Well, first let's get some logistics worked out. What exactly is this job?"

I take a deep breath. How to tell an almost stranger that the internet deemed you unlovable, so your mother wants you to buy someone to help you fall in love? "Um," I begin, searching my brain for a way to spin this into a nice title. "I need a...social assistant."

Mr. Scott stops writing and looks up at me. "A social assistant?"

"Yeah?" I shrug. "I, uh, need someone to help me...manage...my social life. There's a lot going on at work, so sometimes it falls to the wayside."

"Your social life falls to the wayside?"

I nod.

"You mean like fun?" he looks at me with a combination of confusion and pity. It's a face I know well.

"My job is fun," I say, trying to pretend I mean it. "But my mother thinks my social life could be more..." Existent, probably. "She thinks it could use more dedication."

He nods again, pressing his lips together for a second. "Dedication."

Now I'm trying to fight the instinct to roll my eyes, but I've had years of practice. I've been a pathetic workaholic for a long time. "Yes. So she thinks it'd be best if I get some help. So yeah, I guess someone my age would be helpful since it won't be weird to see two young people planning and scheduling...fun, as you say."

Mr. Scott looks like he's smiling just so he won't laugh. "Planning and scheduling fun."

"Yes, must you repeat everything I say?" I groan. "I'm sorry, I don't mean to be rude. This just feels so weird."

Mr. Scott nods, this time he takes on a comforting expression. "That's common for people, but remember you are helping bring someone back into society, so don't feel bad."

He can say that all he wants, but I'm still buying someone. Nothing I can really do about it though, so I take a deep breath and wait for him to keep going.

"Well, I'd like to go over some personality requirements for the job. That way we can find someone who would be the best fit."

"Right." I take my phone out of my bag and find the list my mother sent me. The moment I see it, I know I can't read off exactly what's written. She sent four words. Polite, Punctual, Organized, Social; it's my job to make it less cold, I suppose. But something about the list makes me anxious. Requiring such high respectability from someone so quickly seems hard, especially coming from a life of running away and hiding. I ignore all but one of my mother's words. For a second I fear the consequences of this little rebellion, but only a second. "Well, I'd like someone organized, this job is, in large part, scheduling."

"Any gender preferences?"

I shrug. My mother didn't answer that when I asked and was stuck on it for a while. "I guess whoever you think is best suited for this position."

Mr. Scott looks down at his notes. "Okay, any other requirements? Height? Weight? Build? Race? Intellectual capabilities?"

I think back to my mother's annexed person, Belle, who I can easily call my third parent. She has always been caring and is loyal to my mother. But Belle works mostly at home, not in

the business. No, whoever works for me—whoever I annex—will be in Hart to Heart most days. She'll be interacting with my mother and my mother's harsh criticism. "I guess I'd like them to be smart and to be tough, you know, emotionally." I mutter one last bit, "I just want them to be okay after a day of criticism from my mother."

I look up and see Mr. Scott nodding. "I think I have the perfect person," he says pushing a button. A small hologram transmission appears on his desk. It is of his secretary.

"How may I help you Mr. Scott?"

"Could you please fetch Citlali Martinez and bring her to my office?"

"Absolutely."

"Thanks, Alfred," Mr. Scott says before shutting off the holo-communicator. He turns to me and straightens out like this is the part where he breaks out the tried and true speech. But then he looks down at his notes then up at me again. "So you got roped into this, huh?"

"What?"

"Annexation. It's kinda become a tradition. People grow up with annexed people in their homes then when they grow up their parents always either get them for like Christmas gifts or they end up like you, buying someone cause parents think it's a good idea." He stops and leans back a little. "My family kinda roped me into this job, so I can relate. And we always say we're gonna change things now that we run the show, but we make the same mistakes as our parents and the cycle continues."

I look down at my hands. I hope I do better than he says but the fear in me is suffocating.

"I guess we help people get back into society, so it's not all that bad, I suppose," he says, but something makes me feel like he doesn't believe it. I know I don't. My mother would always say the same thing, but it has never stuck.

There's a nervous knock on the door and Alfred pokes his head in. "Um, Mr. Scott? There was a bit of an incident in the rec room. I have Miss Martinez, but she was involved."

Mr. Scott lets out a deep sigh. "Let her in."

Citlali Martinez walks in with a swollen eye, a busted lip, and a dirty grey t-shirt and pants. Her face is generally angry and looks even more so when she arches a sharp eyebrow at the sight of me. I feel my cheeks go warm and I turn back to Mr. Scott just so I won't have to see those dark brown eyes cut through me again. The eyes of a person I might own soon.

"Have a seat, City," Mr. Scott says and I see her slump down out of the corner of my eye. "So what happened in the rec room?"

I notice her looking around and I wonder if she's ever been in this room before. She's in grey which I remember is the last age bracket. How long has she been here and never in this office? Has anyone even thought of buying her before? She finally looks back at Mr. Scott and her eyes go wide like she just realized he said something.

"Huh?"

"I asked what happened in the rec room."

"Oh. This guy grabbed my ass." Citlali replies, going back to looking around the room.

"And then he beat you?" I ask without thinking.

"Nah, I kicked his ass before his bros tried to step in." She snorts a little and adds, "Tried."

I look her over again. Her feet barely reach the ground; she can't be more than five feet tall, if that, which makes her story all the more impressive. Her knuckles have little white scars on them making me think these fights have happened before. I sneak a peek at her face while she's looking around. Her cheeks are puffy and her nose is round. Her jawline is as sharp as her

eyebrows and her lips are full and look soft. Her neck has a small scratch next to a scar that rolls over her collarbone and hides under her shirt. I look back up at her lips that combine pink and brown perfectly and I notice her bottom lip is split and bleeding. And probably because I'm examining her so meticulously, Citlali Martinez looks at me with what would be big, round eyes if one weren't purple at the moment. She stares at me with a question hiding behind her gaze. I imagine it's something along the lines of *how much am I worth?*

"Yes, she'll do," I find myself saying as I sit back quickly and scroll through my phone, pretending I'm answering some dire business question from work. Anything to keep away from those eyes and the question behind them.

"Wait, what?" she asks suddenly.

"Ms. Hart here would like to buy you," Mr. Scott says calmly. I fight to keep myself from shrinking in my chair. How could I end up buying someone?

Citlali crosses her arms and arches her eyebrow at me again. "Yeah, no thanks."

I can feel my heart sink, but I don't know why. "Oh," I say. "Can she do that?" I ask Mr. Scott. She glares at me, making my heart sink lower.

Mr. Scott holds up a hand. "Ms. Hart, if you could give me a moment alone with Ms. Martinez, I'm sure we can sort this out," he says. I nod and walk out. I find a seat right next to the door and sit down. Alfred is eating a sandwich and watching something on a float screen that sits over his computer monitor. I lean towards the door and listen to the other side. The words are muffled, but I can make them out.

"City, this is the best situation you can hope to end up in," Mr. Scott begins.

"Slavery?"

“It’s not slavery. You know there are many people who de-annex people and help them get their own homes and jobs after a few years.”

“And there are many more who don’t,” Citlali bites back.

Mr. Scott takes a deep breath. “Listen. Your twenty-sixth birthday is two months away. At that point, I can’t keep you anymore. At twenty six you will get sent to a big name center, which isn’t good no matter how you frame it. You either fail their test and get sent to Retirement or, by some barely miracle, you pass and get brainwashed into ultimate submission.”

If his words don’t scare her, they scare me. Something in me makes me swear I won’t leave this place without her and I won’t let her out into the world until I know she’s safe. A deep sense of responsibility washes over me.

Mr. Scott continues, “What Ms. Hart needs is someone who is organized and who can stand on her own two feet. I know you can do it, City. She doesn’t want to change you and she has more than enough money for you to live comfortably, so please accept this better alternative. If she chooses to return you, you won’t be able to return here.” I hear Mr. Scott take another deep breath, “So please, be good.”

2 Citlali Martinez

The bracelet feels cold. It's golden and linked to Rosalie Hart's Osteo-ID implant. It's the prettiest shackle I've ever seen. I hear they run on blood power. Something about the way the blood pumps powers the bracelet so it never has to be charged.

Mr. Scott handed her a box just before we left Mrs. Warren's. It had two extra sets of clothes, my two books, and the little charm that was once attached to my trusty knife. The knife itself is unfortunately not in the box.

This Rosalie Hart insisted on carrying it into the building and up to her apartment even though she just bought me to do simple tasks like this for her. She seems guiltier about this than I expected. Good.

Her apartment is on the top floor of a twenty-five story building. As we walk in she greets everyone by name, but she never mentions me. She doesn't even look at me as we cross the lobby and take the elevator up. I've never been up so high, but I keep my angry face still.

Even when she has to scan her osteochip on her door, Rosalie Hart doesn't let me help her with the box. She opens the door and takes off her shoes. There's a small line of shoes lined up next to the door. I slip out of my own shoes and nudge them next to hers while I stare at the inside of her apartment.

In the middle, there's a big open space bordered by glass windows that show a furnished and plant-covered balcony. Directly in front of it is an indoor living room, but the coffee table looks like a desk with a pair of black and pink gloves sitting on top. Closer to me is a giant kitchen with a bar that's closer to the size of a dining table. On the other side of us are three open doors.

Growing up, watching outdated cable television, I learned apartments were small, cramped studios reserved for college students and the soon to be annexed. But Rosalie Hart's apartment is closer to a house. I shouldn't be surprised this digital princess can comfortably sprawl her things in a space that could house at least a family.

"Fuck," Rosalie Hart curses to herself. I arch an eyebrow at her and watch as she steps into the first doorway. I sneak a look at probably the first ever walk-in coat closet. She starts to shake her head and says, "No way." She turns and walks into the next room after setting the box down next to the door. "First things first."

I walk into the bathroom and watch her open and close several cabinets. The bathroom is twice the size of the giant coat closet. In one corner is a shower that looks like it shoots water out of twelve different spots. Next to it is a tub that can rival a jacuzzi, I wonder if it has jets too.

"Here it is," digital princess announces and she finally looks at me. Her light brown eyes aren't as nervous, but actually light up as she shows me the thick silver tube. What's so magical about this tube? "Let's get you healed up."

I want to laugh, but instead I just go sit on the thick edge of the jacuzzi tub. Rosalie Hart squats in front of me and starts staring at my face.

She's pretty, I have to admit. She has short, wavy, black hair that falls around her face and down to her shoulders. Her eyebrows are long and kinda thick. The brown of her eyes is so dark it's easily mistaken for black. Her nose is rounded at the end and almost looks like a heart if you stare at it long enough. Her lips are between thin and full, but her bottom lip is thicker and I'd be lying to myself if I said I wasn't curious about what they taste like.

She continues to look me over, mumbling little remarks to herself. I feel like a broken statue in a museum. How to fix what people are meant to pay for?

“Okay, let’s start with the bruises. They haven’t formed yet, so that’ll make it easier,” Rosalie Hart says as she turns the knob at the bottom of the thick tube. “Hold still, okay?” She puts the tube against my elbow and clicks it. There is a small stab, like when I’d poke myself with a sewing needle, but it soon disappears. She moves to my right hand, holding it in hers. I try to ignore how soft it is so I stare at my elbow as the redness and swelling on it starts to fade until it goes back to its original brown. She gets my left knuckles. I lift up my right hand and watch as the swelling disappears, but the little cuts are still there. After my left hand she looks up at me and says, “Can I touch your face?”

My eyebrows squish together. No one has ever asked to touch me before and especially since my parents kicked me out. I shrug, but without a definite yes, she doesn’t touch me. She holds the tube to the top of my left cheek and lets out the little stab. She does the same just under my eyebrow.

She turns the knob on the tube and now, I just blatantly stare at her. Why does she want to carry my things? Why is she healing me? Why does she ask permission to touch me?

“Okay, now the cuts.” She starts with my hands and I see her shine a blue light on the cuts and they seal before she moves it to the next hand. She gets the two on my cheeks and I close my eyes, because of how bright the light is. “I won’t hurt you,” she says. I open my eyes and see she’s looking at my split lip. She blushes a little and for a second I wonder if she was one of the lucky queer kids whose parents accepted them. Then I remember the gold bangle on my wrist. “Um,” she begins. “How big is the one on your chest?”

I shrug and pull my collar down until she can see it all. The scratch is small next to the giant scar across my chest. I know she sees it, but she doesn’t mention it or ask me where it came from. She just shines her magic little light on the scratch.

“Do you feel nauseated or do you have any pain?” she asks me, still squatting, still with the tube in her hand. I shake my head. “Okay. This is always in here if you get hurt or something,” she says, getting up and putting the silver tube in one of the drawers. “Let me know if you need any help with it, okay?”

I nod and get up to look in the mirror. My almost black eye is gone and my cheek shows no sign of a scratch. Even an old scar from when I lived in the streets is now gone. I look at my chest, but the big scar is still there. A little reminder that life is unfair and we’re all just waiting to die.

I turn around and find that Rosalie Hart has walked out of the bathroom and into the next room. The door is open and I find her setting my stuff from the box in a set of drawers. The box sits on a big bed--I don’t know how big since I’ve only seen twin size beds for the last eight years. Rosalie Hart takes the now empty box off of the bed and looks at me.

“Sorry if this has been incredibly awkward, I just never thought I’d be doing this.”

My eyebrows jump. My parents, like many, threatened to make me an annexed if I didn’t behave. And today, almost nine years after my parents found me kissing a girl, I was sold.

“God, Tommy’s gonna kill me,” Rosalie Hart says, rubbing her hand over her face.

“Is that your boyfriend?” I hear myself asking.

She laughs a little. “No, she’s my best friend. She’s a lawyer, works in Annexation and Tribal Law. She hates Annexation and she’s gonna kill me when she sees you.”

I stare at her for a little. I didn’t think anyone was really against annexation except the annexed. And what do tribes have to do with any of this?

Rosalie Hart steps into what I correctly assume is another walk-in closet. She waves me in, and I’m surprised to see it’s not full. There’s still empty spots near the back. And if she

pushed her clothes closer together, Ms. Rosalie Hart would only have a bit more than half of the space taken up.

“So we’re probably gonna get you some clothes tomorrow which we can probably fit in here. And the drawers outside are for anything else you want. I won’t go in there. Gives you some shred of freedom. But for now, you can grab anything from in here. The clothes might be a little big, but at least they won’t be grey. I’m thinking you’ll probably want a shower and some sleep in a bigger bed.” She looks me over. “Well, giant, in your case.”

“What about you?” I ask.

She waves a hand at me. “Don’t worry. I have a lot of work tonight, so I’ll be in the living room anyway. We’ll get you set up as soon as possible, I promise.”

I don’t trust anyone’s promises, but for her sake, I nod. She sighs and drops her shoulders like I just finished interviewing her for a job. She walks out of the room, but stops suddenly and says,

“Oh, Citlali--”

“Just City please,” I interrupt.

She nods. “City. That’s nice, it fits you. You can call me Rose, my mom is the only one who calls me Rosalie.”

“Alright, Rose.”

She smiles but quickly shakes it away and continues, “So, uh, are you hungry?”

I shake my head. “But can you show me how to use the space shower?”

The smile from before comes back and even though she really tries, she can’t shake it off this time. “Right, let’s go do that.”

I dream I'm in a cold room with a shackle on my ankle and a voice yelling orders over a speaker system.

You will comply, it says in its rough monotone. When I don't, I get a rough whip on my back. The sting from previous dreams burns on me like every night before.

You will submit.

“No!”

My eyes open to a dark room, I forget where I am for a second. Then I remember Rose and my bracelet. “What time is it?” I mumble. There is a light that glows on the wall and a big digital clock appears. 04:26. “What is this?”

The wall opens a bunch of windows like on a computer and starts to speak softly. “Welcome to Rosalie Hart also known as Rose's personal home computer system. Welcome Citlali Martinez also known as City. You have been granted unlimited access to Rose's files and programs. You have also been granted unlimited Internet access. Would you like to set a new appointment or alarm?”

I blink at the wall. “No, thanks.”

“Very well, would you like to see today's schedule?”

“God, no.”

“Very well, anything else I can do for you, City?”

I shake my head and the light shuts off. I turn to the edge of the bed. I'm a little annoyed with how much effort it takes to get out of this giant thing. But with how comfortable it is, I really can't hate it.

I walk out of the room with the intent to get some water, but the shine on the other side of the glowing wall catches my attention. There are six windows floating around Rose who's fallen

asleep on the couch. I walk around to see one packed calendar floating next to several websites, one for apartment listings in the area. Was this living situation so important to her? I reach for her techy gloves and slip them off. When I do, the windows disappear.

City looks uncomfortable. Marguerite, the stylist who has worked for my family for years and designed my mother's wedding dress and dressed me for every major occasion of my life, has tried every high-collared dress she could find, but nothing suits her quite right. Of course they all *look* good on her, she's attractive, but it doesn't feel right. And when I see City's eyes begging me to get out of yet another shapeless long sleeve dress with a Peter pan collar, I finally break.

"Marguerite," I say softly. "Could we try something a bit less girly?"

"Please, " City mutters to herself.

"Hm," Marguerite says looking City over and going to pick up the clothes she left in a corner of the changing room. City wore one of my tank tops and tucked it a pair of my jeans. On me they usually fit skinny but on City, who is five inches shorter than me, they were baggy even when cuffed. On top of the tank top, City added a light plaid shirt. As Marguerite picked it up, the sleeves remained rolled up.

"Going for an early 1900s Coco Chanel, I see," Marguerite says. The fifty-four year old French woman starts humming and muttering then walks out to the front of the store.

The moment she's out of ear shot, City turns to me and asks, "Can I please get out of this wannabe school girl get-up?"

"Yeah, of course," I say.

City steps off the little platform and reaches for her zipper. It's not until she's unzipped the dress all the way and is pushing it off her shoulders that I notice she's not wearing a bra nor is she planning on walking into the changing room.

"What are you doing?"

City turns to me and I see her scar spanning over her chest. Even though I'm less than an inch away from seeing her breasts, the scar doesn't stop. "I'm taking it off," she says, a confused look on her face.

"I know but out here?"

City looks around and chuckles a bit before walking into the changing room and closing the curtain. It's now that I realize Marguerite had taken the time to move her to the changing room before telling her to change. Did all annexed people just change in front of each other? Did you need freedom to have privacy?

I take a deep breath and look at my phone. My schedule is less than ideal today. Things had to get cancelled and moved around because everywhere we went, no one understood why I was spending money on an annexed person like she was my friend. Dealing with their questions was draining and took forever. The whole time City showed no emotion.

I close out of my schedule and look at the time: 15:22. We have two more stops to go, but one we might not make before closing and the last one is exhausting just to think about. But we had already gotten City a phone, made her a small joint bank account, made sure she was on all of my insurance plans, and gotten her a few things for her first day at Hart to Heart tomorrow. I almost want to just cancel the rest of the day and pick up some some food and go home. Just put all the clothes away, watch a movie, go to bed.

And then there's the whole bed situation. Firstly, I don't have anywhere to put another bed. My mother told me to use the coat closet, but I'm not going to put her in a closet and have her pretend to be Harry Potter. And I don't want her sleeping in a twin bed like a child. She's a year older than me; she should sleep in an adult-sized bed. Which leaves me on the couch again until I can figure something out.

Marguerite comes back with a few button down shirts, some pairs of pants, and a couple ties. “Okay let’s start with the basic look.” She looks up. “Where did she go?”

I point to the dressing room and Marguerite slips some clothes through a side of the curtain. After a few seconds, City emerges with some better fitting pants and a white button down shirt. She steps onto the platform and Marguerite begins measuring City’s clothes and muttering notes that will be sent to the tailored printer. As Marguerite works, City works on folding the sleeves up to her elbows.

“That’s a look for you I see,” Marguerite notes. She turns to me. “So thoughts, Chérie?” I remember her asking my mother this question while I stood there looking pretty and feeling awkward.

“How do you feel, City? Is this better?” I ask.

City looks at herself in the mirror. She plays with her sleeves, tugging them and adjusting them. She did the same thing this morning with my plaid shirt. She nods and goes to fiddle with the hem of her shirt until she decides to tuck it into her slacks. She slides her hands into her pockets and looks up at the mirror. A small smile peeks out of the corner of her mouth.

“Looks like we found it,” I tell Marguerite.

“Je suis d’accord, regard comme elle est mignonne. Now, the femininity will have to come in with accessories. Tu connais ta mère,” Marguerite adds.

My mother will have to be satisfied with a minimal display of femininity. But something tells me she’ll be disappointed no matter what.

Marguerite shows City how to tie a simple knot on a black tie. Once she’s certain City has observed enough, she gives City a floral tie. I watch her small hands move and twist the tie,

finishing off by adjusting it under the collar of her shirt. Marguerite congratulates her and City seems proud of her work.

“Maybe you could teach her another knot too,” I suggest. “Like a Windsor or something.”

City looks at her knot for a few moments before looking up at me. “I only like that knot on really thin ties,” she says softly.

Marguerite nods. “La petite is correct, it would look too bulky on her, I think the one knot should be fine in the meantime.”

I smile and nod. Marguerite looks over City’s outfit before going out again without any explanation. I turn to watch City who is inspecting her tie. It’s light pink with small yellow plumerias lining one edge. The knot itself makes it seem like the flowers have collected nicely at the bottom.

“Is this okay?” I ask.

She nods, still looking at her tie.

“Hey,” I say gently. She looks at me expectantly. “How about after this, we just get some food and go home?”

“I can cook,” City says. She made breakfast this morning. I woke up to the smell of coffee, pancakes, and tofu scramble. I can’t remember the last time I had more of a breakfast than a protein shake and coffee.

“What? No, I can’t make you cook again.”

City shrugs. “I mean, you can. That’s kinda why I’m here.”

I take a deep breath. God, I hate this.

“Besides,” City continues, “your kitchen is really fucking nice and it’d be a waste of it, your food, and me if I didn’t cook.”

I run my hand through my hair. Marguerite comes back with more clothes to add to the outfit. I watch as she puts cardigans and blazers and vests on City who actually starts talking to her about colors and patterns and sizing. City likes her neutrals with a small pop of color, especially yellow. It reminds me of her, so dark and reserved, but a little smile and she can rival the sun.

Marguerite starts changing colors on the clothes to get City a few different colors. At one point, City is torn between two colors she loves on the pants and I tell her get them both. Her eyes get big and confused, but soon she nods.

“You need about twelve business outfits and about eight for casual wear,” I add, mostly to let Marguerite know, but also to see City’s eyes go wide again. The two go back to making outfits and Marguerite brings in more little accessories. I’m glad to be there to see City get visibly excited about cufflinks and pocket squares.

While they work I cancel the next two things for the night and scroll through my phone. Every so often I glance up to see Marguerite and City smiling about talking about a new color combination or accessory City could try. Then there is finding casual clothes for City. For the first time in all the twenty-four years I have spent being dressed by Marguerite, she invites City to the clothing room to look at the styles.

They come back and Marguerite walks up to me with an itemized list of purchases that are being made in the tailor printer as we speak. City goes back in the changing room to put her original clothes back on. She doesn’t close the curtain all the way. I space out in her direction for a moment before she begins to turn and I turn quickly to listen to Marguerite finish up the list.

“And the rest are jeans and typical t-shirts,” she finishes up. “Good call on reducing the femininity, it really made her comfortable with it and sped everything up in the end.”

“Oh,” I say, rubbing the back of my neck. “Yeah, she just looked uncomfortable, so I just figured.”

Marguerite laughed. “I like her, I hope you’ll bring her back soon. Your mother told me you have the Gordon Gala coming up. She may have to suffer in a dress for a night.”

I forgot about that party, and if I had to go so would she. “I suppose you’re right. I’ll let you know as soon as possible.”

“Of course Ms. Hart, a pleasure as always,” she says with a genuine smile. She notices City emerge. “It was most wonderful meeting you City. You are always welcome here,” Marguerite says, taking City’s hand in both of hers.

City smiles and blushes a little. “Thank you,” she says.

One of Marguerite’s assistants emerges with two bags. He hands one to City and one to me. We wave our goodbyes again and head outside where our car is waiting. Henry the driver loads our bags into the trunk and we get in the back seat. I turn to City. “Okay, yes you cooking is the most logical solution.”

“Thank you,” she says, but her monotone makes it hard to tell how she means it.

“But that means I’m gonna put the clothes away, to even things out.”

“Okay.”

“Also cause the closet has a system.”

“Okay,” she says, looking out the window.

“Okay.”

When we get back home, City walks into the kitchen and I head into what is still technically my room. I could easily put all of her clothes in the coat closet, but there's still so much space in mine that it seems silly not to use it. I empty out the bags and start going through them.

They're organized by casual and business. Marguerite made all the items interchangeable so it'd be easier for City to make her own outfits. After however many years she spent being stuck in solid colored uniforms, the transition back into free fashion could be daunting.

I hang up her shirts. They're all soft and still a bit warm from the printer. Then go the pants, all so short that they make me giggle. I move to the casual side of the closet and hang up her her t-shirts, shorts, and jeans. Then I put her ties, cufflinks, and pocket squares in a shallow drawer. Finally the masculine aspects of the closet are getting some use. With both of our clothes together it almost looks like it was a married couple's closet.

I walk out of the room, taking any left over packaging and throwing it away. City is in my old apron. I've had it since I moved into my freshman dorm, but after wearing it once, I never wore it again. It fits big on her like everything else, but is folded in the middle so it's not like a dress on her. As she loads something into the oven, I realize I've never once turned on that oven.

City turns to me, and though I know she didn't hear me come in, she doesn't look surprised. She just nods and starts bringing mixing bowls to the sink.

"Can I help with anything?" I ask.

She looks around. "All that's left is to start on the dishes. But I don't like dishwashers." I'm not sure if she says it just to say it or because she thinks I don't know how to wash dishes in a sink.

“I can do dishes,” I say. I try to keep it from sounding like I’m hurt by her lack of confidence in my domestic skills. “Belle, the woman my family annexed, taught me.”

City looks straight ahead for a second. She shakes her head a little then turns on both faucets. “Okay, grab the last bowls and bring them over,” she says before starting the water. “You want scrubbing or rinsing? Actually nevermind, I’ll scrub, you rinse.”

I roll my eyes a little, but do as told. I set the bowls and spoons down and step in front of the warm still water. City starts making bubbles in the water and I have the sudden urge to play with them. I try not to imagine making a foam beard on City’s face. It just makes me wonder what she sounds like when she laughs.

“So,” she begins, setting a bowl down in my side of the sink. “You had a family annex?”

“My family annexed her,” she says, pausing to emphasize the fact that it’s a verb, not a noun. “My dad bought Belle as a wedding gift for my mother. I guess he hoped it would help her transition to the US, you know? London and Los Angeles are quite different.”

City grunts, so I continue.

“But yeah she basically raised me, along with my parents. And when my dad died a few years back, Belle convinced my mom to let me try to take over Hart to Heart.” I trail off.

I can hear City want to ask why I was so against annexing somebody if my childhood experience was so good. But she doesn’t ask, she just closes that book with a little, “Oh.”

We go back to our silence. It’s not exactly comfortable, but it’s not the most awkward silence I’ve been in. The only sound is of our hands bobbing in and out of the water and the soft clang of plates leaving gentle hands.

“Thank you,” City says as she hands me the last utensil. “You know for the clothes and everything.”

“It’s no problem really. It’s just the basic.”

City shakes her head. “That’s more than the basics. You must’ve dropped like fifteen grand on me today.”

I shrugged. It was a necessary expenditure. It’ll be helpful for when she meets my mom. But beyond that something about getting her clothes and watching her relax in something that she could finally call her own made it worth it.

City unloads the oven while I finish rinsing the last few dishes. In the morning City set the table, so I set out to do that task while she fixes up our plates. I set placemats the same way she had in the morning: facing one another on the outer end of my bar table.

City brings the two plates of lasagna and baked brussel sprouts. She goes back and pours us both glasses of strawberry lemonade. I wait until she sits down. I did the same in the morning even though she fought me the whole way. This time she just lets me wait.

We both take a bite at the same time. “Man I don’t know how I lived off of flavorless nutrition bars for so long,” I say. “You’re so good at this.”

“One of the few Warren classes I excelled at,” she says, taking a sip of lemonade.

I don’t doubt it. Mr. Quentin Scott gave me a copy of City’s transcript and progress in the time she spent at the center, along with her public Annexation records, but the folder sits in my purse, unopened, waiting to be taken to my safe drawer at Hart to Heart. I wonder if she’s being serious or modest. In any case, I worry about how my mother will deal with her.

“So, about tomorrow,” I begin. “You’ll probably spend most of the time with my mother.”

“Okay.”

“But the thing about me mother is that she’s....” I’m not quite sure how to say it. “She’s a little...particular.”

City nods and keeps eating. “I got it.”

“Okay well when I say particular I mean it in a bad way. And she’s vocal about how particular she is.”

“I know, Rose.”

“I don’t think you do,” I say.

“Your mom is super critical and will let you know it. I get it. I’ve met plenty of women like her before,” City says.

I’m taken aback by her statement. Plenty? What is plenty? When would she even have the time to meet plenty of women? I shake the thought away and speak up again. “The point is I just want you to be ready. You know, emotionally.”

City nods and looks down at her food. I copy her, but in the second I glance up at her again, I swear I can see her smile.

4 Citlali

I stand still as Rose straightens my tie again. She's fixed my jacket, shirt, collar, and tie eight times from the moment I stepped out of the closet to now as we wait for her mother in the main conference room of Hart to Heart Headquarters. It reminds me of getting ready for church when I was little.

"Remember," Rose says. "She'll probably have criticism no matter how perfect you are, so don't take it to heart. But please tell me if she does anything that hurts you cause I'll handle it, okay?"

I nod even though I know I won't tell her anything. I've never been someone who tells people about her bullies.

Rose smiles and run her hands over my shoulders once more. "You'll be great. I know it," she says squeezing my arms a little. I hear the door and Rose turns quickly, almost shielding me from Ishita Hart, ceo of Hart to Heart International.

"Hello, Mother," Rose says.

"Step aside, Rosalie, so I can see it." Her British accent surprises me more than her words.

Rosalie stands up a bit straighter. "Her name is City."

I feel a tug on my arm and I stumble forward into the full view of Mrs. Hart.

She looks just like her daughter, only darker and older. She has a glare that I hope never flashes over Rose's face. She looks me over, pursing her lips and walking around me. She gives me the annexed shopping experience I always expected.

"What is she wearing?"

"Office attire," Rose answers.

“For men, perhaps? At least remove the tie and open the collar,” Ishita says. She undoes my tie and unbuttons my shirt until she sees the scar on my chest. She lets go and turns to Rose.

“Rosalie Anne Hart, you purchased a wrangled annex?”

“I annexed someone who was wrangled.” Rosalie glances at me and holds her ground.

“She was the most qualified choice.”

Ishita looks at me as I button up my shirt. “She doesn’t seem particularly social,” she says, her eyes staring down at me in judgment. You’d think she was a saint sitting up on a cloud.

“City is organized, tidy, and a quick study. She can easily schedule my outings,” Rose says, defending me once again. “Being social is my part of the job, not hers.”

Ishita Hart never takes her eyes off me. She grabs my chin and makes me look up at her. “Are you going to be able to read people to see who is right for my daughter and who is not?”

“You get a pretty good bull shit detector from the life I’ve lived.”

She arches an eyebrow at me and lets go. “Rosalie, there is a meeting with a board member happening in my office in ten minutes. Go get ready to lead.”

Rose blinks. “Now?”

“If you want this company, you must be able to think quickly. Now go.”

Rose gives me a sympathetic look before rushing out of the conference room. I’m left alone with the mistress of hell herself. I finish re-tying my tie and wait for her to address me.

“City, was it? Is that your full name?”

“No, ma’am. My name is Citlali Martinez.”

She circles me as she speaks. I keep my hands behind my back and my shoulders squared. “I don’t like nicknames. It forces a familiarity that has not been earned.” She lifts my

chin with her finger and looks down at me with dark eyes. “Now, why did you have to be wrangled?”

“I was a runaway, ma’am.” It’s not entirely true, but something tells me it’s a safer answer.

“Hmm, a runaway Mexican. Brave of you. Not very smart, but brave.” She lets go of my chin and walks behind me. I can still feel her inspecting eyes on my back. “So, you wanted freedom?”

“Yes, ma’am.”

“Do you still want freedom?”

I turn around and look at her. She’s smiling, but it’s far from warm. No matter how I answer this I’m fucked. So I just look her in the eye and wait to see if she’ll ask again. She does not.

“I can get you freedom. A house of your own, paid off so you don’t have to worry about losing it again. Freedom like the rest of us. I only ask that you get my daughter married.” Ishita Hart sits in one of the seats in the conference table and crosses her legs. “Rosalie wants to run this company, and I think she can do it. But no one is going to respect her until she is in a committed relationship. Our brand requires a show of partnership. It requires its leaders to portray all of the good that can come from our company. All the good that can come from love and marriage. Understood?”

“Yes, ma’am.”

“Good. For Rosalie to be happy, she wants this company. And for you to be happy, you need your freedom. And you hold the key to that. Get Rosalie married and everyone can be

happy. Simple? Yes. Benevolent? Yes. So simple and benevolent that we don't have to discuss what happens if you fail, correct?"

"Correct, ma'am."

"Good." For the first time, Ishita Hart smiles which is arguably scarier. "Now it would be in your best interest to make sure the dates go well. So as much planning on your part will be beneficial."

I nod. I'm pretty sure she prefers me as silent as possible.

"As well as scheduling and planning the dates, you should make sure Rosalie is likeable."

"Ma'am?"

Ishita Hart doesn't hesitate to clarify her daughter's faults. "Rosalie is passionate. But can be outspoken and quite awkward. Your job is to teach her to hold her tongue."

I nod, even though I disagree.

"She's so work-minded and she often talks over men. It's always about her work about running a company. She never gives them a chance to treat her like a lady." Ishita pauses to take a sip of water. "And do make sure she lets him pay. It's a simple ego-boost that goes straight to men's fragile little hearts."

"Yes ma'am."

Ishita sighs and taps her fingers on her glass. The twinkle sound they make seems too soft to have come from her. Everything about reads hard. She gives a little sigh. "As long as she knows her place it should go well."

I nod. "It will be handled, ma'am."

The door of the conference room opens and a woman steps in holding a wrapped tray of food. “Hello Ishita,” the woman says. “I have your lunch ready. I know it's a little early, but I know you metabolize much quicker in the morning. I don't want your energy level to drop.”

“Belle, you are a treat, did you know?” Mrs. Hart says.

The woman sets the tray down in front of Mrs. Hart. I see the faded gold bangle on her wrist I wonder if this Annex person is for the company or for Mrs. Hart personally. She turns to me her eyes locked onto my own golden bracelet.

“I'm sorry, dear, I didn't see you there who might you be?” I know she means who's might you be.

“I'm Rosalie Hart's annexed person.” Ishita Hart looks at me and I add, “ma'am”

“Oh, that's right. Rosie did mention wanting one of her own. The influence of growing up with a good one,” she says. “I'm Belle, but I'm sure she's told you all about me already.”

“Maribel, you have only just met Citlali,” Ishita says between bites of curry and rice.

“Maribel?” I ask pronouncing her name in Spanish.

“Citlali,” she answers. “Is this a new trend of Mexican girls dressing like boys? Didn't go well for Mexicans in suits. Historically.”

“She has a rather large scar under her tie,” answers Mrs. Hart.

One of Maribel's eyebrows arches at me, but she says nothing. She turns to Mrs. Hart, devotion clear on her face. “Is there anything else I can do for you?”

“Yes. Please take Citlali to our IT department then come back,” Ishita Hart says after sipping from her mug of tea. It smells like an expensive Earl Grey.

“Right away,” she says. She look at me and opens the door.

“One more thing, Citlali,” Ishita calls from her spot at the table. “While you're here, keep her away from Thomas Crawford.”

I'm not sure who she means, but I nod and follow Maribel out the door. We walk silently to the elevator. The first time Maribel speaks to me is in the elevator.

“What was your overall score?”

She means my Annexability score. The higher you get likelier you are to get put in a good place with good people. It's scored out of a hundred and most people who score under fifty end up being bought by companies and factories. “Seventy three, m'am.” I reply.

“Hm,” Maribel hums out her disapproval. “Strange of Rosie not to follow the numbers. Mrs. Hart would never have made that mistake.”

I say nothing.

“Her husband picked me because I had a ninety-nine point five,” she says with a smirk I see reflected on the metal doors of the elevator. “The numbers don't lie.”

Still I say nothing. I watch as Maribel scans over my reflection and make faces at the various parts of me.

“Do they still only give one uniform when you leave?” she asks.

“We get three.”

She shakes her head with a tight grin. “They spoil you children these days.” The bell dings and the door opens. “The IT department is down this hall.”

I nod but she grabs my wrist before I can leave.

“Remember, just as easily as you were purchased, you can be returned.” She lets go with a glare and the doors close.

I lean back and look at them all floating in front of us. The five most eligible bachelors in Los Angeles. City is tapping away on her tablet, but the harsh pressing of her fingers make me think of children when they get their first tablets at school. It doesn't help that she's wearing her gray Warren's Center uniform T-shirt and black athletic shorts, making her look like a school kid.

I sigh. "What do you think, City?"

"About what?" she asks, scrolling on her tablet then tapping again.

"You know about the guys. Which one do you think is attractive or like a boyfriend you'd want to have?"

City stops and turns to me. She blinks a few times. "Wait, you don't know?"

I shrug. "I mean I didn't think one was obviously your type. Is it obvious?"

City makes a face and opens her mouth a few times. Then she just drops her shoulders and says, "Rose, I'm a lesbian."

I stop and slowly start to nod. "Oh," I say softly. "Oh. Oh cool. Cool."

"I'm not the first one you've ever met am I?"

"No!"

City arches an eyebrow.

"Sorry that was loud. No, my best friend, Tommy, is a lesbian too. Her mom is super supportive, but most people don't know. But that's cool. It is 2099, isn't it? We can be cool about this."

City turns back to her tapping. "Cool," she mutters.

“Right,” I say. “So, there are five of them, so I say we should get them all one after the other.” I hope we can fit all of them in two days.

“I would but your mother requested one per week,” City answers. “Something about testing communication. I'm not going to lie, sometimes I don't understand what she's saying.”

“It's Hart to Heart jargon, don't worry about it.” Another window appears; it's a notification for the 78th annual Gordon Charity Gala “Speaking of elitism.”

City looks up. “Does that say Annexed family strongly encouraged to attend?”

“It's less of an encouragement and more of a requirement.”

“What even is this, and why am I expected to attend?” City asks.

I sigh and push my hair back. “The gala started off as a kind of charity event. The Gordon family has always been big on philanthropy, but even more so on people knowing just how benevolent they are.”

“Does that have an Unavoidable Stamp on it?”

In an attempt to get people to stop running from IRS collectors and eviction notices especially, the government created Unavoidable emails. Emails with this stamp open automatically and can't be closed until they are acknowledged and replied to, leaving a paper trail for notices and their reception. I wonder how City recognizes it. What genuinely urgent emails has she seen with that stamp?

“Yeah the Gordons are,” I try to find the right word, “interesting like that.”

“Hm,” City arches an eyebrow. She looks over the email again then turns to me. “So they made a whole party to show off,” she says; it's not much of a question.

“Pretty much. That's why it's customary to bring your annexed people. They sell it as a chance to show off the good you're doing in the world.”

“Seems petty.”

“Mostly self-gratifying, but yeah.” I can feel City watching me. Something about her gaze makes me think she has another question about my decisions. I always feel like she is wondering why I tend to do things I hate. I shrug and rolls my eyes a little. “I go because I have to. But also because Tommy. Her history with the event is less than...less than ideal.”

“Tommy? The best friend? Are all your old friends going to be there?”

I can’t help but laugh at my lonely childhood. “I don't have many, but yeah. Ty and Tommy will be there. All the big families go. And some of their networking friends and company CEOs, and board members and all that, so it'll be a pretty packed house.”

“How many families are there?”

“About twenty.”

If City wonders why I don’t have more friends, she doesn’t ask. “Okay,” she says. “How about we read about them first?” City asks. “Here, I'll read. You listen.”

I sigh and nod. After pulling my feet up on the couch and hugging my knees, I respond, “Okay, I'm ready.”

“Okay.” City pulls up the profile of the first bachelor. Four pictures fill the space: two moving and two still. His basic profile shows up too. It says he’s six feet tall, two hundred pounds and mixed, but he doesn't look mixed. Then again, sometimes neither do I. He has light brown eyes and brown hair. It's cut short like a good boy and in his pictures, he's getting some kind of degree and then opening a well in a random country with many thankful brown people.

“So this is Curtis Reginald. He is currently getting a masters in Psychology at Brown after taking two years off and working for a company that builds wells for the needy. He is twenty five. He likes dogs, modernist art, and playing badminton on Sunday afternoons.”

“He doesn't sound too bad,” I say. “And I guess he gets cuter the more I look at him, which is better than the alternative.”

“Okay want to try him first?”

I stare at the profile and pictures. I wait for something anything to happen in my stomach. A spark or even a single flutter, but there's nothing. My eyes remain locked on the screen with my final shred of hope as I ask, “I really can't just get them all done at once?”

“No,” City answers. “You can't get to know someone in two seconds, Rose.” She pauses and the moment I turn to her, her jaw locks up. Her attention is buried in her tablet a second later. “Besides,” she adds, “one of them could be the one.”

My eyes don't move from her jawline. Something about it draws my attention, begging to be traced. It's sharp and beckoning. My hands slips between my knees as I slowly become aware of how much I want to touch it. I let out a quiet breath. “Do you want me to do one a week?”

City turns to look at me. Something flickers in her eyes; I'm not sure what. “Yes,” she says finally. “I want you to give this a real shot. You could be happy.” She turns back to her tablet quickly.

“Okay, I'll do it her way.”

“Good,” City says. “Do you want to hear about the others?”

“No, I'll get them mixed up.”

“Fair enough,” she says.

City goes back to tapping and I go back to reviewing the notes on the latest articles for the Hart to Heart website. Most of them on relationships and some adds for date nights and couples getaways. I notice how many pictures are only men and women. There are no couples that aren't straight. I wonder for the first time if we even cater to non-straight relationships.

I glance at City for a moment, but she's concentrating on her task. And since she's doing her work, I figure I should do mine.

I roll my neck and sit back on the couch a moment. The clock screen reads 2:09 AM. I look at City who's been asleep for the last few hours. She's curled up against the back of the couch. I wonder if I'll ever get used to how small she is.

But she starts squirming. Her hands start balling into fists and she starts whimpering. Her eyes shut tighter and she starts moving her arms and trying to stretch out of some invisible confines.

"Hey, hey, hey," I say, taking off my computing gloves. I grab her shoulders and rub her arms gently. "It's okay. You're okay," I tell her. She seems to calm down a bit. I watch her hands loosen and her breathing even out.

After making sure she's sound asleep again, I go to slip my gloves back on. As soon as I get one on, she starts up again. But the squirming is stronger and the whimpering almost sounds like words. I pull my glove off and go back to soothing City.

"It's okay," I tell her. I see little tears sneak out of the corners of her eyes and brush them away with my thumb. "You're safe. I won't let anything hurt you."

It takes a few moments for her to calm down again and in the process her head falls lazily onto my shoulder. She grabs onto my shirt, but the grip isn't hard like before. I look down and see she still hasn't woken up. I wonder how often she has these nightmares.

I exhale deeply and steadily try to stand up. She doesn't seem very heavy, but I haven't picked anyone up in a long time and especially someone who isn't a child. But she's easy to

balance and I walk us to my room. No sense in sleeping uncomfortably in the couch if she needs to touch me to be able to sleep.

I lay her down first and quickly climb on the bed next to her before she starts up again. I take a hold of her hand and pull on the blanket folded at the end of the bed. It should be warm enough for the both of us.

In her sleep, City curls up next to me and sleeps soundly. “I got you,” I say, wrapping my arms around her. “It’s okay.”

6 City

Somehow the dream doesn't end. It dissolves. The voice from every night turns to a whisper and is lost to the wind. The shackle liquifies and slips off my ankle. The darkness is chased away by a warm pink light that becomes yellow and sunny, with all the warmth I haven't felt in years. I turn and look around, but find no walls, only the pink and yellow glow. For a moment, I watch the colors dance.

The colors float around me and soon they have me spinning. The pink becomes a hand and it begins dancing with me. I watch it take form and hug me close.

You're safe, I hear.

I wake up with sunlight gleaming. Rose's soft mattress is already familiar to me, but the feeling of being hugged is unfamiliar. I'm confused. A part of me want to snuggle closer since I haven't been hugged since I was a child. But another part of me is getting ready to kill if I have to.

I blink a few times and see a collarbone. I turn my head upwards and see Rosalie Hart's sleeping face. She looks calm like she's never had a nightmare in her life. I want to see her like this when she's awake.

I slip my hand out from between us and run a finger along her jawline. She smiles gently in her sleep and I freeze. But the moment the smile is gone, my finger tries to bring it back with another caress. This time it comes with a giggle. Then a soft groan and soon Rose is blinking sleepily at me. Her eyes go wide after a second. "How long have you been awake?" she asks, awkwardly pulling her arms away from me.

I scramble off the bed and try not to act like I was wondering what it'd be like to wake up like this everyday. "Sorry, I'll get started on breakfast." I rush to the kitchen. I can hear Rose walk up behind me as I stare at the pantry.

"I'm sorry. I didn't mean to scare you just...last night you started, I don't know, having a nightmare, I guess, and you would only calm down if I held you, so that's how we ended up asleep in the same bed. I swear we only slept."

"How do you feel about oatmeal?" I ask.

"City, how often do you have nightmares?"

I sigh and take out the oatmeal anyway. "I don't know. Often."

"Like once a week?"

"Every night."

I can feel Rose stare at me. "What do you do when someone's not there to hug you?"

I don't know how to tell her that no one is ever there to hug me. "I wake up."

"Is that's why you're always up so early?" she says softly. "You can't sleep after."

I shake my head.

"So you only get a few hours of sleep?"

I nod.

"No, you can't run on that little sleep."

"Why not? You do."

Rose huffs and crosses her arms. She stands there while I start cooking the oatmeal and slicing fruit to add to it. Rose sits at her spot on the bar and lets out a frustrated sigh. "Fine. I won't either. We'll both sleep a healthy amount."

I turn to her. "You want us to sleep together?"

“I mean, it's a practical solution. The bed is huge, so we both fit. It keeps us both on a healthy schedule. And sleep is necessary for both our jobs. I read somewhere that sleeping burns calories. And that cuddling is good for the immune system.”

“So is broccoli, Rose.”

“Yeah, but broccoli doesn't stop your nightmares, now does it?”

I turn to her and she looks down at the table. She covers herself with an arm. By the time she speaks, she has pulled her other arm around her so she's hugging herself. Having woken up in those arms, I can attest to how warm and comforting they really are.

“Besides,” she begins again in a small voice. “We calm each other down. We both need to sleep more and, honestly, I can't fit another bed anywhere.” Rose rubs the back of her neck. “Only if you're okay with it, though.”

I stir the oats in silence. This is the most energized I've felt in months. For once in a long time the day doesn't feel like a big hurdle to get over to go back to sleep. And sleep doesn't feel deceptive. I finish the oatmeal and serve it into bowls. Rose grabs two spoons and I pour us each a of glass of orange juice. “Fine.”

Rose looks at me with hopeful eyes.

“Fine. We'll be healthy.”

She smiles and eats a spoonful of oatmeal. There's a knock on the door and Rose checks her phone to see who it is. She looks at the door then back at her phone. “It's Belle,” she says before getting up and smoothing her hair. She begins to walk to the door but stops and holds a hand over my head until I nod and she runs her hands over my hair a little too and fixes my shirt.

She opens the door and Belle walks in with yet another plate of food in hand and I wonder if she does anything but feed the Hart women. “Hi, Belle. This is unexpected,” she says with a smile. Not like the one with the oatmeal. This one is forced.

“Oh, Rosie, you know how I love to bring you food and make sure you’re being healthy.” She looks down at our bowls of oatmeal. She glances at Rose who is luckily in earshot or else I’d have to hear about how subpar my breakfast is and how it must be because I had to be wrangled. “Isn’t it a bit late for breakfast, dear?” she asks Rose.

I look at the clock on the stove. It’s 10:31.

“Belle, you know Saturdays are for sleeping in. And since Mother wants me to become better acquainted with my social life, why not? This is what the social world does,” Rose offers with a laugh.

Belle turns to me. “Do you often wear your Annexation Center uniform at home?” I’m not sure when she had the chance to examine me, but I’m not surprised her criticism showed up before any greeting.

I glanced at Rose whose eyes beg me to lie. “Yes ma'am.”

“And what time did you wake up?”

“4 a.m.” I memorize my lies and build a fort to protect Rose. Though a part of me isn’t sure if Rose would do the same.

“Correct. Good, where did you sleep, Dear?” she ask. It's obvious Ishita sent her to spy.

“I sleep in the coat closet.”

Belle nods.

I glance at Rose who looks hurt, but grateful.

“So, how is the social life?” She doesn't ask Rose, she asks me.

“Good, I just got confirmation from Mr. Reginald this morning.”

“For when?”

“This coming Friday. He’ll pick Rosalie from Hart to Heart Headquarters and take her to dinner.” Rose’s face slowly dissolves into confusion as she looks between us.

“Where?”

“At Palm and Hibiscus. The private balcony has been reserved for them.”

“Dinner? That’s it?”

“No, as it will be on a Friday, the ballroom will be open for dancing,” I reply. I glance at Rose’s blinking eyes. “And the garden connects to the balcony, so there may be a romantic stroll, if desired.”

Belle eyes me, no doubt searching for a hole in my plan.

“And the moon is likely to be full that night. Adds another layer of romance,” I add.

She looks me over with an arched eyebrow before nodding. “Good.” She looks down at her bracelet. “Well, that must be your mother,” she says cheerfully to Rose. “Best be off then. Oh Rosie, please be sure to visit, your mother and I miss having you around the house.”

Rose nods, but is still visibly confused. “Right, of course.” She hugs Belle before holding the door open for the woman.

“Have a good day, Dears,” she calls out before leaving.

When she’s out of earshot I turn to Rose. “The amount of joy that woman feels when anyone mentions your mother is scary.”

Rose shrugs. “They’re basically best friends.” With a slump, Rose sits back down to finish her oatmeal. “That was weird, right? Like did she really just come to bring us food?”

“Bring you food,” I correct, looking at the inside of the tupperware. “Only has one serving.”

Rose sighs and rolls her eyes. “I’m sorry. I don’t know what’s up with her lately.”

I do, but I just put the food away. “It’s no big. I can cook for myself.”

We eat in silence for a while until Rose breaks it. “Did you plan that whole date?”

I nod. Rose makes a face like she’s trying to hide a smile. I wonder if there has ever been a time where she wasn’t trying to stifle something about herself. “Have you been on many?” she asks.

“Many what?”

“Dates.”

“Been on a few,” I reply. “You?”

“A couple,” she says before sipping her orange juice. “The first one was simple. Went to get coffee with a boy I thought was cute from my freshman year Economics class.”

“I was fifteen and we went bowling with a bunch of friends. But we snuck away at some point to the bathroom. No one questions two girls in the bathroom together.”

Rose smiles and finishes the last of her oatmeal.

This isn't going well. When will be the day we add how much people talk to their bios and dating profiles. I'm convinced that had both of us been on Hart to Heart's database, we would've had the worst score in history.

The first date was at least better. But only by a microscopic measure. Rather than be outwardly narcissistic and rude around everyone, Curtis Reginald was only a prick to people he found to be valueless.

He had disrespected the waiters to their faces and while they were in earshot. He never stopped talking about the restaurant's "lack of professionalism" and the "dimwitted ways of the unrefined." Then, with the last breath of his rant, he had asked, "Don't you agree?"

When he had asked me a young man a bit older than us was in the process of setting down our plates. And though the waiter never looked at me, I saw the hopelessness in his eyes. It was a morose knowing that a rich girl would never care about how he felt.

"No," I had answered. "They are feeding you, and I'd like it if you respected your hosts."

There was a small smile on the waiter's face as he left. And any romantic notion of the date left with him. The night ended without dances and without walks.

But City had been right about the moon and how full and beautiful it would be that night. I stared at it the whole way home in Mr. Reginald's car, waiting until I finally got home to a sleepy City and got to wrap her in my arms.

This one Peter Dante, is twenty five and is being groomed to take over his father's private spa and jacuzzi company. When he runs out of things to say he always falls back on another sale story of how he was part of the donation program that works to get swim lessons for annexed

people to prevent drownings. I started counting and he's told the story or some part of the story eight times in the two hour span of the date.

"Not only will it reduce property damages, but we could soon have annexed life guards posted at the beach twenty four hours a day," I hear him say again. I guess we're at nine now.

The only upside to being stuck in bachelor number two's car, which has been "optimized for networking and discussion," is that at least he can't tell that I'm staring out the window at the scenery behind his rather inflated head.

I hide a sigh of relief when I see a familiar building and know I'll be home soon enough. The end of this disastrous date could not come sooner. When she had told me about the date, I was actually excited. Peter Dante had wanted something more casual, so City had us get lunch and go to a small neighborhood carnival put on by the city with the help of several high schools.

I'm sure City had not expected the date to end up with him talking non-stop about the most boring things in the world. I bet it would've been much better to go with her. Just two friends at a carnival. Given how short she is, she probably wouldn't have met the height requirement of most of the rides. But we'd go on every single one she could get on. And we'd play games until I won her a plush toy. And she'd make me a cotton candy mustache. And she'd notice how some of the sugar was stuck on my lip. And offer to take it off.

The door opens next to me and I get yanked out of my reverie. "Oh," I say softly.

"I didn't realize my Thailand story was so enthralling," Mr. Peter Dante says with a laugh even though my reaction was to the door. "This was fun," he adds immediately after.

I only nod because I can't lie that well verbally.

"Will I see you next week?"

“I,” I pause to clear my throat since I have only spoken five times in the last two and a half hours. “I have the Gordon Gala, so I can’t.”

“Right,” he says. “Another time then.”

“Have a good evening,” I reply before stepping out of the car and rushing inside. I make my way into the elevator and lean back on the back wall as we climb up. I let out a long sigh and check my phone.

A green light tells me City is home and another notification tells me she’s using the wall monitor. I pull the pages up on my phone and she’s on the Hart to Heart “Date Ideas” page.

Every week there’s a new update and every day that’s the website City is browsing. She’s seen almost all of them and keeps files of ones she finds interesting. They’re all nicely organized in her files. There’s even one folder called Rose preferred.

The elevator door opens and I lock my phone with a deep sigh.

City is dedicated to her job. She answers to my mother and to the rich boys my mother has picked out for me. She answers to their precise needs and their particularities and still she somehow finds a way to make sure the date is fun. At least it would be if it was with someone else.

I run my hand over the scanner and step inside. “Hey,” I call as I kick my shoes off at the door.

“Hey,” I hear from City in the living room. I find her scrolling on her couch. “How was it?” she asks, setting the tablet down. City doesn’t always give me her undivided attention, but she always does when I come home from a date or when she asks me about my thoughts about dates or the men. It’s nerve wracking.

I slump down next to City and try to find a nice way of calling Peter Dante the most annoying human of all time. “It was okay,” I say.

City arches an eyebrow at me. “What do you mean?”

I shrug. “It was just, I dunno, okay.”

City nods, but I can feel the skepticism. I want to tell her it was awful, but something stops me. “You think you’ll see him again?” she asks.

I look down. She had interrogated me about the last date the morning after, but now in the sunlight, she questions me without sleepy eyes and without escape. “I don’t know.”

“Well, did you like him?”

I pull on my fingers. I want to say no that I didn’t, but I can hear my mother berating City; telling her she’s being too easy on me. That I could really like one if I tried. I don’t want City to be subjected to that. “I think,” I say, “that it’s too early to tell.”

“So maybe another date?”

“Maybe. But after all the others.” I had said the same thing about Curtis Reginald, hoping a guy I actually liked would show up in my mother’s choices.

City says nothing, only nods. She reaches for her tablet and starts her routine of scrolling. I watch her for a bit. I watch her concentrate on dates that would make me happy. On compromising what I want and what my mother wants. I watch her prioritize my happiness.

I stare at the mirror in the changing room of Marguerite's clothing shop. When we came in, Marguerite's anxious and apologetic expression never wavered. "I have another one ready if you can't go through with it."

Mrs. Ishita Hart requested that I wear a low neck dress. So here, in the small room, I stare at the yellow lace that borders the scar on my chest.

No one besides me and the doctors at the HOMR have ever seen it in its full six and a half inch length. And now everyone would get to gawk while Ishita was made into a saint for taking in one of the scarred and pitiful.

The first person to walk into the room is Marguerite. She looks close to tears but I'm not sure if it's because of the scar, the dress, or me.

"You are magnificent," she says softly.

I keep my eyes on the mirror and see Rose when she pokes her head in the room. I turn around and walk to the viewing area where she stands. My eyes trail over her completely, taking in and memorizing the sight of her in a light pink, floor length dress.

But when my eyes reach her face, she has no smile, not even a fake one like I've seen on her so many times before. She looks at me with pity and a murderous glare hiding behind her eyes.

"Marguerite, tu peux m'expliquer la robe?" Rose asks in French as if a language change will keep me ignorant of what they're discussing.

Marguerite seems to agree with me because she answers in English rather than French. "Your mother wanted the scar visible."

Rose glances at my scar then looks back into my eyes. I've never seen such a sharp look of protectiveness on anyone.

"You don't have to do this," Rose says as she pulls on one of my fingers. If she wanted to reduce the intimacy of the moment, she failed.

"It's okay, Rose," I say softly. I want to tell her that I know what I am, but if I do, she'll end up in a screaming match with her mother. So I don't. "This one is pretty, Marguerite."

Marguerite nods and starts to note details on the hemline. For this job, Marguerite and her assistants have done most of the work by hand or with a sewing machine. "The computer is for math, not for art," she had said earlier. Once she finishes the notes on my dress, she goes to take notes on Rose's dress.

I try not to but I can't help staring at Rosalie Anne Hart in a soft pink dress.

"Magnifique," Marguerite gushes, causing Rose to blush. "You look..." Marguerite doesn't finish, just starts moving her hands, trying to find the right word.

"Beautiful," I finish.

Rose stares at me and her blush spreads up to her ears and down her neck. I watch the patches of red appear until the tuck under the dress. I glance up and she's still staring at me, her bright cheeks getting brighter.

"That's all I need mes belles petites, go change out of the dresses," Marguerite tells us. I sneak another look, decorating the walls of my brain with the image of Rose in this pink dress. I don't even want to think about how she'll look when it's done. When we emerge, Marguerite has a paper copy of our delivery time. Friday morning at ten o'clock, while we're at work. She promises to deliver it herself. She pulls us in for hugs and wishes us well.

Henry is waiting outside as always. We climb into the car and Henry drives us back to Rose's apartment. Even though it technically is, I can't call the place home. For once, Rose is the one looking out the window. That's how she spots a random grocery store on the way.

"Can we stop here real quick," Rose asks in front of the grocery store. Henry nods and pulls into the parking lot. He parks and Rose takes my hand. "Come on."

"What are we even getting?" I ask as we get out of the car. She pulls me by the hand into the large grocery store and walks up to a boy sweeping. He looks about seventeen years old.

"Excuse me," she says, "where is the alcohol?"

He looks confused. He looks between us and says, "I'm sorry, Miss. I'm going to have to see your ID first. Both of yours." Rose sticks out the inside of her wrist. She pats my shoulder and I hold out my shackle. He just stares blankly.

"You can scan them," she says.

He goes back to sweeping. "Down aisle seven."

Rose turns in the direction he says. "Sorry," I mutter quickly and follow her. As we walk she stops and grabs a Vanilla Coke. She looks over the selection. She picks up the most expensive French Caribbean rum available. "Okay, what do you want. Pick whatever."

I arch an eyebrow at her and get a six pack of Pacifico.

Just like she had with my box when I moved in, Rose carries the paper bag of alcohol all the way up to her apartment. She's silent as she makes her way to the bar where she empties the bag and opens a Pacifico and shoves it into my hands. I watch her move swiftly to the cupboard and bring out a small shot glass and a large tumbler. I have a sneaking suspicion that the cup

hasn't been used since she was in college. When she fills the cup with three shots worth of rum, I'm convinced that I'm right.

“Woah, are you sure you don't want me to make that for you?” I ask.

Rose flashes a grin and I feel heat shoot up to my cheeks. “Don't worry,” she says. “I'm a big girl.” She adds another shot worth and tops the rest with vanilla coke. “Okay, let's play a drinking game,” Rose announces, grabbing my empty hand and walking us to the living room.

“With two people?”

“Yeah, why not?”

“What are we even gonna play? Never Have I Ever?”

The mischief in Rose's eye twinkles and she pulls on a computing glove. In a few seconds, a Never Have I Ever Generator is projected onto the wall. “Come on,” Rose cheers, tugging on my shirt to get me to sit down next to her on the couch. I drop down next to her and take a swig before we even start, remembering the first time I played this. Back before I had any real experiences.

Rose starts the generator and reads it outloud, “Never have I ever drank illegally.”

I take a sip and reply, “This is my first legal beer.”

Rose laughs and take a drink as well. She generates a new statement. “Never have I ever made out in school.” She watches my bottle as I tilt it up. “High school?”

“Yeah and eighth grade. Broom closets, bleachers, girl's locker room.”

Rose blushes.

“None for you?”

“Does college count?”

I shrug. “I dunno, never been.”

Rose generates a new question. “Ladies, never have I ever left him wanting more,” she reads but her voice trails off at the end.

Even though I never have, I drink anyway. Rose looks like she’s looking for some crucial information all of the sudden. But then she shakes it away and generates a new question while she also takes a drink. “Never have I ever broken a bone,” Rose reads. She takes another drink and so do I. “Hairline fracture. My mother was furious.”

“Wranglers broke a few.”

“How did that happen?”

“The bones, you mean?”

Rose shrugs. “All of it actually. Like, how did you run away?”

“I never ran away,” I say, feeling oddly pedantic.

“You didn’t?” Rose asks. “Then how did you get wrangled?”

“My parents didn’t take me to a center or to the cops. My dad just push me out the door and my mom locked it.”

“And you had nowhere to go?” Rose asks.

I shake my head. “My parents are the way they are for a reason, so I doubt my grandparents or uncles would have helped me.”

“How long were you....” She trails off, looking for the name before wrangled. The technical term is Street Identified.

“How long was I homeless, you mean?”

Rose blushes and takes a big chug of her drink.

“A couple months,” I answer. I finish my beer and grab another one from the fridge.

“Months?” Rose asks. “People can last months before being wrangled?”

I shrug. "Yeah, it's possible." I drop down next to her on the couch again Rose is staring at her drink like she's counting the number of questions she's asked. I wonder if she scared to probe too far. No one has been before, so why should she fear hurting my feelings?

"How?" she asked softly. She looks like she's pushing through something but I don't know why.

"I don't know if you want to hear that story."

She sets the cup down on the coffee table. No coaster. Then she turns to me. "Did they hurt you?"

The look in her eyes scares me. No one has ever looked at me that way and I doubt anyone has ever looked at their Annex that way. I can feel the need to touch me radiate off of her, but she doesn't without my permission. I fear the day she'll realize her favorite toy is worthless.

"They didn't hurt me," I say, finally. "Not really." I take another drink as Rose keeps staring at me with that protective look. "I used to stay in random women's houses in exchange for sex."

Rose blinks a few times before reaching for her cup. By the time she stops her long chug, the cup is more than halfway empty. Something about this makes me arch one of my eyebrows. If she weren't such a spaz already, I think she was a queer mess.

"For sex?" she asks, but her voice cracks a little bit.

"Yeah they'd feed me and then we'd fuck and then I'd leave in the morning when they left for work," I answer. "Sometimes."

Rose's eyes are locked on her drink. She looks like she's fighting some kind of feeling, but I can't tell which. It looks like anger but it has way too much hurt and confusion in it. "What do you mean sometimes?"

"Sometimes they'd pay me to stay longer. Usually they keep me for their days off and have us pretend to be married or we'd play some other random game."

The women would never know my name. They always call me something different. I'd always be whoever they lost. High school loves who got kicked out. College loves who went off and got married. Old loves who wouldn't fight for them. I became their memories and, for those months, I lived in the past.

Rose is quiet and though I'm not looking at her, I can feel her looking at me. I glance up at her frown and continue my story. I hope in vain that I can make her smile again. But my story, unfortunately, is a sad one.

"So I did that for a while until I met some queer kids who were hanging around the basement of a bodega."

Rose's little smile flashes. A lightning bolt in this dark story.

"About a month after that, they raided the place and raids mean bullets." I lift up my shirt and Rose gasps at the sight of my bullet scar. "It went through me, which was the only way I was able to make it."

She looks up slightly at my chest then up a bit higher until she looks me in the eyes. "And the other one?" She says it hushed like she's not sure she's allowed to ask.

"Standard procedure. It used to be accidental and if you had to be wrangled you tended to have scars. But then it became legal. Women got chest scars for some reason, men got arm scars. They're usually pretty small since most people don't have scars anymore anyway. Me, I got an

extra nice one for being a Mexican they couldn't deport. That's why it's so jagged and took forever to heal."

She looks down. "Belle used to mention that. She said it was rare to annex a Mexican without scars." She bites her lip then releases it before speaking again. "How many of you were there?" Rose asks, her question quota long forgotten. "In the bodega, I mean."

"There were about ten of us, most of us were teenagers. The youngest of us was eleven though. The next youngest was fourteen."

"Eleven?" Rose repeats softly. "And they all died?"

I sigh and nod before taking a long drink of my beer.

"Did you see them?"

I nod again. "Sasha, the fourteen year old, died right next to me." I lean back on the couch and let out a half smile. "I loved that kid. She had this girlfriend who moved away when her parents found out about them, but Sasha was trying to find a way to get to Arizona to get her girl back and go to Mexico. She always grilled me to teach her Spanish."

Rose tries to smile but it doesn't come out quite right. "And the youngest was a runaway too?"

I shake my head. "He got kicked out. His parents didn't believe he was a boy." I wish this particular story had a better end but it doesn't.

"How can all these awful things still be happening?"

I run my hand over my face. "People always say that as time goes on will always be more progressive. I don't really believe that. We've never done anything different and just expecting kids to be better is lazy. And I know from all the women who kept me. Cuz being gay and brown

is still a problem. And they've never really told us we're safe to exist. That's why things will always suck.”

Rose says nothing, just looks down at my lap. It's not until I move my hand that I realize she's staring at my gold bracelet. She's frowning again and I feel like it's my fault, even though I know none of this is. But still, I deliberately change topics.

“So, uh. Never have I ever been rich,” I say, trying very hard to be playful.

Rose smiles a little, but sets her cup down. She pulls off the one computing glove and the room is suddenly lit only by the city lights outside. “It's getting late, we should probably get to bed.”

I nod and reach for Rose's cup, but she stops me with a soft touch on my hand.

“Leave it. I'll get it,” she says. “You go get ready for bed.”

I don't argue, though a part of me still wants to.

In the closet, after I've picked some shorts to sleep in, I stare at myself in the mirror. I brush my fingers over my scars. First the small ones, then the bigger ones on my torso. I wonder for a second how Rose would react to seeing them all. To seeing me all. Would she ask to touch them? Would she kiss them? Would that fix them?

I turn to Rose's side of the closet and take one of her college T shirts. The buzzing from the alcohol makes me want to be close to her. Makes me want her to see me in her clothes. Makes me want to pretend that she doesn't own me. And though I'll be in her arms in a moment, I still smell her shirt before putting it on.

I don't know how City can go back to complete normalcy after telling me all she's gone through last night. She's just her usual self, sitting at her desk, tapping away on her tablet, meanwhile I've read the same paragraph at least ten times.

I glance at her. She fiddles with the new tie Marguerite gave her, this one light blue with grey diagonal stripes. She runs her fingers around the end of it. I stare at her fingers then trace my way up the tie and to her lips. City has this little pout when she works that makes her cheeks puff out a little. The sight makes me smile, but frown soon after. She's adorable and I hate that she's suffered.

I take a deep breath and exit out of the proposed document for Hart to Heart's newest website update. I lean over to my safe drawer and type in the combination. All that's inside are City's documents from Warren's Center. It hasn't left this safe since City's first day here. I've never even opened it.

I slide her file into my bag and get up. "If you need me I'll be in the bathroom," I call as I leave the office.

I hide in one of the stalls and read her file.

Name: Citlali Martinez

DOB: May 10th 2074

Nationality/Ethnicity: USA-Hispanic (Mexican)

Height: 4'11''

Weight: 115 lbs

Skin/Hair/Eye: Tan-Dark Brown-Dark Brown

Status: Wrangled-scarred, chest Feb. 2092

Acquisition dates

Parents May 10th 2074

Street-identified October 19th 2091

Los Angeles Hospital of Minimal Resources (LA HOMR) February 28th 2092

Post Wrangle holding

Warren's Center May 27th 2092

Rosalie Anne Hart March 18th 2099

The next pages are her medical records. Most of her hospital visits have been in HOMRs except the newest information from our medical visit. I scan over her Post-Wrangle report.

Citlali Martinez age 17

Treated for: blood loss, legal scarring, bullet wound, torso, broken bones-2 ribs, femur, fractured wrist, right.

Legal Scarring: treated without scar inhibitor

Overnight: Feb 28, 2092 to May 26, 2092

Transfer to Mrs. Warren's Center for Annexed Youth May 27, 2092

I swallow hard and flip through her Warren's records, but stop at her pictures.

The first picture is as close to a mugshot someone can get without actually having one. Her face is dirty and scratched. It reminds me of the day I met her, but she's much more disheveled in this picture. Her hair is long, but one side is braided tight to her head. She's in a dirty sweatshirt that looks like it was once yellow, but would never be so ever again. I look back at her face. No smile as always, but she has tear-streaks on her cheeks, bordered by small walls of dirt. The picture must've been taken right after she got wrangled. Right after she saw all of her friends get killed. And probably before she was even able to get help. I look again at her sweater and see the blood soaking through it on her chest.

I shut my eyes and lift the picture to find a much cleaner picture of City. She's in a blue t-shirt and her hair is braided. I imagine this was taken at Warren's Center. Eighteen year old City still has no smile. I don't blame her. The next pictures are of her moving through the brackets. Blue shirt. Blue Shirt. Violet. Violet. Violet. Violet. Grey. Always braids and never smiles.

Behind these picture are all of City's school IDs from the Public School Records. I watch as her pictures make her younger and younger. Slowly her smile becomes more genuine until her kindergarten picture shows the smile I'm dreaming to see. The one whose hints I've seen. City's smile, complete with an adorable gap in her front teeth.

I spend a few moments flipping between this picture and the one of her just after she'd been wrangled. Then I flip though the school pictures and watch as her smile fades and her sophomore ID is left with barely an attempt at a smile. I watch as her happiness dies, as her hope dies.

The realization sits heavy in my stomach and I run my index finger over City's cheek in her five year old picture and her wrangle picture. I wish I had been there to protect her.

The door outside opens and I jump slightly at the sound. Two women are chatting away, but I hear one of them say "annexed girl."

"Do you know anything about her?"

"Does anyone?"

"She's been here for three weeks, someone has to know something about her."

"I think she's a kind of Latin."

"That's obvious. Latin girls always have such great skin."

"True. I wonder which kind she is."

"She doesn't look too exotic so probably just a Mexican."

"Mrs. Hart's annex is a Mexican too, pretty hilarious isn't it?"

"I hear they're good cleaners, so I'm not entirely surprised."

"So she gets to be a billionaire for something she's already genetically good at?"

“I know. I can’t stand free loading annexes. I swear the government just rewards laziness.”

“Agreed.”

“Does she even clean?”

“I’ve never seen it. She seems more like Miss Hart’s assistant.”

“Another job stolen by an annex.” I hear the click of a compact. “Want to grab a salad at Upskale?”

“Yes, please, that sounds delicious.”

I wait for the sound of the door and step out of the stall. It’s hard to breathe and I grab the sink counter to get my balance. The word lucky replays in my head while the image of City’s blood-soaked sweatshirt flashes in my mind. I hear the door open again and see City at the doorway.

She walks up to me, staring at my hands. “Are you okay, Rose?”

I let go of the counter and hug her. I hug her tight as the word lucky screams in my head and her picture pushes against my knuckles that grip her shirt tight. I feel her run her hands over my back.

I pull away and see City’s confused and concerned look.

“For,” I stammer. “For yesterday. It just seemed like you could use a hug.”

City nods slowly before hiding a yawn behind her hand. “I could, thanks,” she says. I nod as well.

Then we just stand there looking at each other.

“Can I go pee now?” City asks.

“Of course. You don’t have to ask, just yeah,” I say as I turn to leave. “It’s almost lunch so I’ll be waiting in the office. But take your time. No rush. Okay bye!” I leave the bathroom and curse my awkwardness. I see two women walking towards the door, chatting away. I recognize their voices and walk in front of them before they leave.

“Hello, Miss Hart,” they both say.

“I have reason to remind you both that the Hart to Heart’s harassment policy extends to all employees, and if I hear you speak in an ill manner about your colleagues again, free or not, there will be consequences.”

The women freeze and look down.

“Understood?”

“Yes, Miss Hart.”

“Good. Enjoy your lunch,” I say and they shuffle away. I take a deep breath and walk back to my office. I slide City’s files back into my safe. I look over at City’s desk. Neat and minimalist. I run my hand over her stylus, it’s still warm like her hands always are.

“Ready to eat?” I hear City ask.

I nod and follow her out the door.

10 City

The ballroom is enormous and every wall is covered in gold. The staircase and the statues are coated in a shimmery silver. It feels like I fell asleep in front of a painting in a museum and soon my mom will come wake me up and I'll go home. But I blink several times and it doesn't blur away. Everyone else in the room is walking around like this is normal, like they didn't search the whole earth for every spec of gold to stick it to these walls for all eternity. A monopoly of rocks.

I feel Rose's hand slip into mine. "It's gonna be okay," she whispers into my ear. "I'll be with you the whole time, I promise." Something in me makes me want to lean into her. Have her hug me like at night. I want that protection now, because the nightmare feels real today. But instead I nod and assure her,

"I'll be fine."

She pulls me gently into the ballroom and already I can feel people staring. First at my chest then down to our linked hands. The ones around our age snicker while the older ones whisper to themselves about something. I catch a bit of one comment, "The Harts and their Mexicans."

As if on cue, Ishita and Belle walk up to us. Rose hides our hands behind her back, and though I'm pretty sure our handholding would be inconspicuous, I'm glad she does.

"Jacob Gordon will be here soon," Ishita says. "Are you ready?"

Rose makes a face. "Ready for what?"

"To introduce Citlali," Ishita answers like it should be obvious. Rose squeezes my hand tighter behind her back.

"Introduce her? To him?" Rose spits out.

Ishita Hart sighs gently and walks up to her daughter, making Rose let go of my hand. “Rosalie,” Mrs. Hart says as she plays with the wavy ends of Rose’s short hair. “You have to prove you can control the company, which is directly related to how well you can handle your annex. You must.”

Rose sighs and turns to me. “City, are you okay with meeting him? We won’t go if you don’t want to.” She looks me directly in the eye as she asks. She does this everytime. Stares at me to make sure I won’t lie to her.

I nod. “I’ll be okay.”

Rose nods back at me and takes my hand. “Okay, let’s go.” She walks me up to where Gordon sits behind annexed security guards. He watches the party from his high spot and it makes me think he wouldn’t feel insulted if someone compared him to Zeus.

Before we get to the area, Rose stops me and takes me by the shoulders. “Listen,” she says. “We only have to introduce ourselves and leave. No one stays in his area longer than that. So we can survive a few minutes.” Rose sighs quickly and continues, “Gordon is a creep and he has a lot of power, but I promise City, he will never lay a hand on you. Okay?”

I nod as I always do when Rosalie Hart tries to warn me of the woes of her world. She nods as well and, after a deep breath, she turns and walks towards the burly guards.

“Who are you, little girl?” one of them asks.

“I’m Rosalie Anne Hart, heiress to Hart to Heart International. I’d like to introduce Mr. Gordon to my annexed person.” Rose stands up straight with her head held high and I walk with my head slightly lowered.

The two men nod and step aside for us to walk through the small opening. There aren’t many people in there, only other annexed people who bring Gordon his drinks and food. Gordon

himself is spread out on a chair that could almost be called a loveseat if it was a bit wider. He sits with his arms and legs spread like he's waiting for two girls to sit on his lap. He has a deep tan and grey hair, but what catches me off guard are his icy blue eyes. It feels like staring into a sky that could send thunder or sunshine, but you're never sure which it will be.

"Little Miss Hart," he says, still seated. "To what do I owe the pleasure?"

Rose swallows quietly before walking up and speaking. "Mr. Gordon, I thought you'd like to meet my new annex, Citlali." She motions to me. I step forward and drop my head, in classic annexed fashion.

"I see," he says. "Well, she certainly is marvelous. What purpose have you with such a beauty?"

"I picked her for her skills. The beauty is merely an unforeseen benefit," I hear Rose say. Something about hearing Rose call me beautiful makes my palms sweaty.

"Mm," Gordon murmurs. From the sound of it, I can tell he's stood up and is in front of me. "Look up, girl," he says.

I tilt my head upwards and see him look into my eyes before he notices my scar.

"Wrangled?" Gordon laughs a deep chuckle that makes me note the exits around me. "I didn't know you like them naughty, Miss Hart."

He reaches a hand out, but Rose catches it before his fingers can brush over my scar. Rose's face is serious and predatory. Would she kill him for me?

Gordon pulls his hand back and tries to keep the insult off his face. "It seems you may be associating too much with the Crawfords."

Rose steps in front of me and looks Gordon in the eyes. "I don't like people presuming that they can touch that which is mine." I'd never seen Rose so certain and so fearless. "Now,"

she continues. “Seeing as you have met the person I annexed, I’d like to go associate with the other guests. Goodnight Mr. Gordon.”

“Goodnight, little Hart,” he laughed. Then in a louder voice, “If you see the Crawfords, please tell them I miss them.”

I follow Rose back into the hallway where she gave me the little pep talk. Once we get to the middle, Rose leans against the wall and starts breathing deeply. “Oh my god, I can’t believe I just did that,” she says between heavy breaths.

I rub her back. “Me neither, I didn’t know Rosalie Hart could be a badass.”

“I think I’m gonna be sick.”

A laugh escapes my mouth before I can stop it. The look in Rose’s eyes when she hears it is one I’ve never seen before, on anyone. I look away. “Come on. I think you deserve a drink.”

“You think they have hot chocolate?”

Her question makes me smile. “I don’t think so, Princess.”

“Well, I guess I’ll have to settle for rum and coke,” Rose says with a shrug as we head towards the bar. “I don’t think they’ll have Pacifico, either.”

“I’ll manage.”

Before we can make it to the bar, Belle and Ishita come up behind us and ask to whisk Rose away. Before she leaves, Rose grabs a hold of my hand. “Are you gonna be okay?” she asks.

I smile and nod. “I’ll wait for you at the bar.”

Rose smiles back and nods. “Could you order that drink for me please?”

I nod and pull away gently from her grip. I walk to the rather lonely bar and sit down. After ordering the drinks and flashing my banged ID, I stare at my hand and wonder why it

suddenly feels so empty. When the bartender sets my paloma down on the bar, someone sits next to me.

“Ooh, those are delicious,” she says. The woman is deeply tan, and has on an emerald dress. She seems around Ishita’s age, but she has a much gentler smile. “Good choice,” she says.

“Yeah,” I agree. “They are good.”

The bartender comes up and has a smile of familiarity for the woman.

“A Manhattan, please,” she says to him before turning to me again. “I saw you up there with Gordon.”

I nod, making sure I’m as neutral as possible.

“He’s awful, isn’t he?”

I glance up at Gordon who now has a girl on his lap. I can’t tell if she has a bangle or not and it worries me. “Seems like it,” I say.

“Had you met him before?”

I shake my head.

“The first time is the worst.”

“Will I have to again?”

She smiles. “Hopefully not.”

I look up again and see some people leave. They shy away from his roped-off area. They all look like they’re shrinking away from his touch, from anything about him. He doesn’t seem particularly popular even though this is his party.

I look her over, and think over what she’s said. “Can I ask you something?”

She nods. “You may.”

“Why does everyone comes to this if they seem to hate him?”

A laugh escapes the woman and for some reason she sounds like a mother. “You should meet my daughter. I’m sure you two would get along famously. But to answer your question, it’s tradition. And all of these families’ companies are related.”

“So it’s like a fucked up Thanksgiving?”

“Thanksgiving is its own fuckery,” she says. “But yes, one could say that.”

I can't help but smile. “I take it you’ve known the Gordons a long time?”

She nods before taking a sip of her dark drink. “I was annexed into their family.”

I blink at her and she flashes the scars on her thighs.

“You were wrangled?”

“Tribal Annexation is a little different, but these are still servitude scars. And I still have the bracelet battery in me.” I’m met with a small scar on her inner forearm.

“Battery? You mean for these?” I raise up my own wrist.

She nods. “Before they could run on the pulse energy, the batteries had to be injected into the bloodstream and as they moved they would power the bracelet. But the problem is that they’re so small, they can never be found or removed.”

The scar is so small, but it feels bigger than the one on my chest. “So it’ll be there forever.”

“Pretty much,” she says with a defeated sigh. She turns and something catches her attention. “Oh Mimi, come meet my friend.”

The woman waves down a another beautiful brown woman, but this one looks about my age. Her dress is white with gold shimmering through it. Her hair is braided to one side leaving her flawless face open for all the world to appreciate. Even with the scowl she’s wearing, it’s hard for me to keep from short-circuiting.

It's way worse when her sultry smile makes an appearance. "I'd love to meet your friend, Mom," she says.

"You're her daughter?" I ask without thinking.

She smirks. "Sometimes I'm her son."

I can tell my cheeks are red now.

"Mimi, this is my friend...." The woman turns to me. "Oh, I just realized I never got your name."

"Citlali Martinez."

"Rita Crawford," she smiled, before gesturing to the woman beside her, "And this is—"

"Thomas Crawford," the woman in white says, extending her hand to me. I take it and watch her eyes shift to the gold bracelet around my wrist. She recovers quickly, releasing my hand without comment.

"Why do I know your name?" I ask without thinking.

Thomas shrugs with a bit of a chuckle. "I don't know. I didn't think I was that popular."

It takes me a moment to recall the name. "Oh right, Ishita Hart mentioned you."

Thomas and Rita look at each other. Rita puts a comforting hand on my arm. "Citlali, who introduced you to Jacob Gordon?"

I look between them, but can't find it in me to lie. "Rosalie Hart."

Thomas looks at me with squinted, skeptical eyes. "Why would Rosalie Hart introduce you to Gordon?"

"Because she owns me," I say, but it's a bit of a question. "I'm her annex."

Thomas takes a deep breath while Rita nods slowly. Neither say anything until Thomas declares. "I'm gonna kill her."

For a second, I worry she means me, but then Rita says, “Now, Tommy, Rose has been your best friend since you were eight.”

“People kill their best friends all the time,” Tommy counters. As the mother and daughter bicker I try to piece everything together. The gorgeous, lesbian friend Ishita specifically wanted me to keep away from Rose. What about her was so dangerous? Had Rose loved her at some point? The thought hurts.

“Hey City, did you get that drink?” Rose asks, coming up behind me.

“Rosalie,” the white-dressed woman seethes.

“Tommy?!” Rose says, suddenly looking as though she’s in mortal danger. The look in Rose’s eyes reminds me of the first thing I learned about Tommy, she hates Annexation.

“What the hell, Kid?” she said, gesturing towards me. It’s a rough, tossed out hand.

Rose holds up a finger while she drinks down the entirety of her rum and coke. “Okay, Tommy, I can explain. It was Ishita, she made me.”

“Oh I love when these two fight,” Rita says leaning next to me. “Always a good show.”

“When have you ever done what Ishita asked you to do?”

“You know Ishita, she’s insane. She’ll get what she wants no matter what.”

Rita makes a bit of a shrug. What has Ishita tried to get and failed, I wonder.

“Then let her deal with it. Don’t let her drag you into this mess.”

Rose looks down then at me and physically bites her lip. I can’t stop staring at it.

“You’re better than this, Rosalie Anne,” Tommy says.

“Don’t you dare middle name me, Thomas ‘I don’t have a middle name’ Crawford.”

“That’s racist! You know Tribal Annexed kids don’t get middle names. Not to mention they’re super colonialist.”

“You’re right, that was insensitive. It won’t happen again.”

“Good.”

“Good.”

They both stare each other down, breathing a bit harder than normal.

“You still annexed someone.”

“I’m aware, Tommy.” Rose says with a glare. “But now we’re circling. And Ty just texted me, so I’m gonna go find a friend who loves me unconditionally.”

Something shoots through my stomach and I pray it’s just a reaction to what’s happening around me and not to Rose leaving. Or not to Rose already having someone who loves her unconditionally.

“How do you do it?” I hear Tommy ask.

I turn to her, she’s a little pink in her brown face. “How do I do what?”

“Live with her.”

“It helps that I don’t have a choice.”

“That is true.” Tommy shrugs then looks me over. She glances at the empty glass I left on the bar then back at me. “You eat yet?” The question reminds me of when I’d go to my grandparents’ house as a kid.

I shake my head.

“Well then, let’s get you some food. Can’t have you pulling a Rosalie-Anne-in-Paris now can we?”

Before I can ask what she means, Tommy pulls me toward a buffet area. Everyone stares at Tommy as we walk. Not even my scar can pull their eyes away from Tommy. Those with gold

bracelets stare in awe. And those without look down their noses. Tommy doesn't seem to notice and makes plates of food. I watch as they stare.

"How do you feel about artichoke dip?" Tommy asks.

"Everyone is staring at you," I reply.

"Oh yeah happens all the time. So artichoke dip?" she asks again.

"They all, like," I'm not sure how to say it, "mad-dogging."

Tommy just smiles. "Yeah, par for the course."

"What did you do?" I ask.

Tommy looks up from the food trays for the first time. "Rose didn't tell you?"

I shrug. "She said you're a lawyer."

"Hm." Tommy hands me a plate. "I think we need a quieter place to talk. If that's fine with you."

I nod, somewhat more used to people asking my permission after living with Rose Hart for almost a month. Tommy sets her hand on my back and leads me away from the food table. We walk to a small balcony that overlooks a small park-like area. Tommy sets her plate on the thick balcony wall and turns to me.

"Pretty right? Rose and I used to play here when we got bored. Ty too, when he wasn't being paraded by his parents."

I wonder for a moment what their childhood must have been like. Simple. Secure. Free.

I look down at my plate full of the finger-foods I was taught to make in Mrs. Warren's.

"So what did you do?" I ask Tommy to get away from my own memories.

Tommy drops her shoulders and lets out a sigh. "Well, it started when my parents died. So like all orphaned brown kids, I was put in a containment center. For me, it was on the rez."

“Wait,” I ask. “You were...?”

“Annexed?” Tommy finishes. “Yeah for a little. Until the adoption papers went through.”

“Adoption?”

“Yeah, Mama and Papa Crawford.”

I look back inside and see Rita Crawford talking to a different annexed man. She is laughing with him and he seems used to this. “So both you and your mom used to be annexed?”

Tommy nods and pops a small pomme duchess in her mouth. I reach for my own pomme duchess. The potato looks a bit lighter than it should, but Tommy didn’t seem to mind so I don’t either. We both look out onto the grass. Now I picture their childhoods again. Less free than before.

“And that’s why they all look at you that way?” I ask.

“Well, there’s the whole thing with my mom,” Tommy adds with a shrug. “It’s not a big thing, but people treat it like a big thing.”

I feel a sudden bump on my shoulder and turn to find Rose. “Hey, guys, what are we talking about!”

I resist the urge to look back to see City's reaction. But I know she'll be safe with Tommy, so I don't. I make it to the front of the party and find Ty with a big smile ready for me.

I try to smile back, but Tommy's words sink deep into me.

"What's the matter?" Ty says.

I sigh and nod behind me. "Just Tommy being...."

"An asshole?" Ty supplies.

"I mean, yeah. Always. But this time I deserve it."

Ty pulls me in for a hug. It feels weird to hug someone taller than me. "I'm sure you don't."

"Ty, I annexed someone."

"That's surprising," he says.

"It is?" I need reassurance from someone that I'm a better person than this.

"Yeah cause you never let anyone help you with anything."

Now I just feel worse.

"But you annexing someone has nothing to do with Tommy," Ty says. Then he looks at me with curiosity clear on his face. "Why did you get one by the way?"

"My mother's numbers couldn't find me a match."

"I find that hard to believe. Anyone would be beyond lucky to have you."

"Tell that to the machines," I say. I sigh and glance over to City and Tommy who have moved to the buffet table. They're talking. City looks confused and keeps glancing around at people.

"Well machines don't have eyes to see how perfect you are."

“Oh, that’s sweet,” I say still staring as Tommy finally looks at City. She gives City that lopsided grin that I’ve seen her pull on so many other girls. They stare at each other for much too long. “Hey do you wanna get something to eat?”

“Uh, sure.” We start towards the table, but Tommy sets her hand on the small of City’s back and possibly rubs her thumb along the line of City’s spine and guides her away from the table. City says nothing, but how could Tommy not ask if it was okay to touch her first. Why did she think that touch would be welcome? “So, see anything good? They have those crostinis you always like.”

I try to turn back to Ty. but my eyes are glued to Tommy’s hand even as they move further away. “Which crostinis?”

“The goat cheese ones.”

“Oh, with the fig and olive tapenade,” I say turning quickly to the food, thankful for the distraction. Ty hands me a small toasted bread topped with a purple spread. As it sits on my tastebuds I wonder if City’s would taste better, and something convinces me they would.

Ty makes an exaggerated food-induced moan. “Rose, you have to taste the smoked bluefish pâté. It’s delicious.” He hands me some on a cracker. I take it and pop it in my mouth. It’s smooth and salty and I wonder again what City’s version would taste like. And since I’m thinking of City’s cooking, I search for her.

I spot her with Tommy on the balcony. The balcony Tommy and I would go play on when we got bored of this party. The balcony where I’ve found, on multiple occasions, Thomas Crawford making out with a girl.

I vaguely hear Ty say something.

“Uh huh,” I reply as I watch City, who keeps looking at Tommy attentively. Her eyes seem locked on Tommy who barely looks up. She doesn’t deserve all the attention City is giving her.

Ty says something else.

“For sure,” I reply as City seems to blush. The smell of fig-olive tapenade makes its way to me and since I’m distracted, I just open my mouth on instinct and bite off half of a crostini. My eyes are still locked on City and Tommy who look out from the balcony under the moon.

A full moon adds a layer of romanticism I hear City say in my mind.

“Hey Ty wanna go to the balcony?”

“Uh yeah gimme a sec,” he says. Then adds, “Unless you want to join me then we can both go.”

“I’ll meet you there,” I say before walking to the balcony. I try to make it look just like walking, but I fail and, in my haste to get between them, I bump into City. “Hey, guys, what are we talking about!”

City turns to me, visibly surprised to see me, while Tommy rolls her eyes at my sudden appearance. “Oh, Tommy was just telling me about some big thing.”

Tommy smirks at me. “I keep it in a box.”

I feel my cheeks go warm. “You promised not to talk about Paris.”

Tommy just laughs as City looks at us confused. She brushes it off and looks at me. “Is there something you need?” she asks.

This question makes me look down at her bracelet.

“Don’t worry, City. Rose is just scared I’ll steal you away,” Tommy jokes.

“No.”

City and Tommy both arch eyebrows at me.

“I mean. Um.” I see Ty finally catch up to me. “City, I need you to set up a date for tomorrow. With Ty.”

I feel Ty freeze up next to me and I see Tommy turn her head like she heard me wrong. City just blinks at me and asks, “What?”

“You know, a date like the ones you’ve been planning since you got here.”

She steps back a bit with one foot. “I know what you meant, but why would you date someone who’s still in the H2H system?”

Ty steps in. “I was only in the system for four days, three years ago.”

Tommy seems to snort and Ty glares at her. “Only four?” Tommy asks, “Giving up isn’t like you, Tyler.”

Ty straightens out. “I have my reasons.”

City stares at Ty, looking him over. I wonder what her assessment is. But then she looks me over in the same way. It reminds me of the way my mother would stare me down until I spilled my guts as a child and it makes me talk.

“Yeah. Ty and I weren’t in the system at the same time, so who knows maybe we might be good together. I mean we’re good friends, so why not?”

Tommy shrugs. “I mean we’re good friends too and you don’t see us going on a date.”

For some reason I laugh. It feels weird until Ty chuckles too. Tommy and City both look unamused. “Tommy, you know I’m straight.” I reach for Ty’s hand that feels colder and bigger than City’s. “And I haven’t hung out with Ty in so long. Tomorrow will be really,” I try to find the word but settle for, “cool.”

Tommy fails to suppress an incredulous laugh. “Using cool again, are we, Paris?”

I glare at Tommy for bringing that up again then turn to City. “So can you set that up?”

City looks up from the ground. “Yes, ma’am.” She swallows and pulls up my social schedule on her bracelet, before asking, “What time would you both prefer?”

Ty steps up again. He’s so much taller than her and she doesn’t try to look him in the eye. He moves to look at me and says, “How about I pick you up at ten and see where the day takes us. I think I know you well enough to plan my own date.”

“The whole day?” Tommy asks, disbelief clear on her face. “You’re gonna spend the whole day together?”

“Yeah,” I agree even though I was looking forward to sitting on the couch all day with City. “Yeah it’s gonna be cool.”

Tommy smirks and I freeze a little. “So you won’t be needing City’s help tomorrow?”

“I can help her with anything she needs,” Ty says. City stares at him with what I feel is a glare, but I can’t be sure.

Tommy nods. “Well then, City, since you have the day off, wanna get lunch with me? My treat.”

City looks at me and says, “Sure.”

I turn back to Tommy who is looking me dead in the eyes. “Cool.”

“Rosalie,” I hear and behind me is my mother and Belle.

“Hi, Mrs. Hart, lovely to see you, as always,” Tommy chimes in.

My mother only hums in disapproval. “Rosalie could I speak to you and Citlali privately?”

I see City drop her head out of the corner of my eye and nod.

Ishita looks at the others. “Good Evening, Mr. Nishikawa. Thomas.”

Tommy waves as we walk down to park area. I look back and see Ty and Tommy have moved inside, or possibly have simply ducked under the balcony wall. Ty wouldn't, but Tommy is liable to act out any nonsense idea. I'd know from all our childhood schemes.

“So what is this date, Citlali?”

I'm taken aback by this question. Did she mean the date with Ty? “How did you even find out about that?”

My mother doesn't turn to me when she answers. “Your social calendar is set up to send me notifications, so I can monitor your progress. Now, Citlali, the question.”

City never looks up. “Rosalie requested a date be scheduled for her and Tyler Nishikawa. And he wanted to plan it, so I have no role in this.”

My mother turns to me. “Mr. Nishikawa?” she asks, her British accent wavers on his name, so as to not butcher it. “That's an,” she pauses for a moment, “interesting development.”

Belle steps in and touches my cheeks, smiling in that way she often did when she was on my side. “I think it's lovely,” she says in a conspiratorial whisper.

“Do share your insights with us, won't you Maribelle?”

“Well, they've known each other since they were children. What a good foundation for a long lasting relationship.” Belle glances at City before adding, “You have to know someone a long time to truly love them.”

I can feel City stiffen up next to me, and it occurs to me that City and Belle may have a bit of animosity towards one another.

“It's rare for love to blossom on first sight, wouldn't you agree Mrs. Hart?” She turns her gaze from City to look at my mother, who seems to have gone as rigid as City.

“Go on the date and we’ll see from there,” my mother decides. “But get home soon to be ready for tomorrow.” With that my mother and Belle leave.

The air becomes thick. Neither City nor I move. I look at the grass on the ground and remember all the times Tommy and I ran around here. All the boring, stuffy galas made fun on this random patch of grass. And eventually Ty would join us, always worried to wrinkle his suits while Tommy and I rolled around. Feels weird to think I’ll be on a date with him in several hours.

“We should get you home,” City says.

I nod. “Let me text them and we can just leave from here. We’ll see them tomorrow anyway.”

City doesn’t judge me like some antisocial weirdo who doesn’t want to say bye to her only two friends. She just nods.

The walk to the car is quiet. The car ride is quiet. The ride up the elevator is quiet. Getting ready for bed is quiet until I hear City walk past my room.

“Aren’t you gonna sleep?” I ask stepping out and finding her in the living room.

City rubs the back of her neck. “Uh,” she looks anywhere but at me, “I’m gonna sleep on the couch tonight.”

It feels like my stomach is sinking. But it’s slow and agonizing. “But you’ll have nightmares.”

She shrugs. “Maybe I won’t. Who knows.” She lays down on the couch. Her hands find each other on her stomach and she starts to tweedle her thumbs, waiting for me to leave.

“But what about me?” I ask. “What if I need help sleeping?”

City's eyes close before she answers. "Ty said he could give you all that you need. Goodnight Rosalie." With that she turns away from me and the sinking feeling becomes rougher; like claws are scraping at my insides.

I walk back to my room. How long has it been since I was alone in this bed. It's cold when I get in. The faint smell of City floats to me and I search for its source. City's pillow. I hug it close and pretend, until I fall asleep, that everything is normal.

The bed moves and I wake up. It's still dark, but I see City making her way under the covers. She says nothing only moves the pillow out of my arms and settles in its place. She's trembling for a bit even after she secure in my arms.

"I'm sorry," I say. "I was being an asshole."

I feel her hide her face in my neck. "Yeah, you were."

Something about that makes me smile. I hug her tighter and close my eyes.

12 City

The morning is quiet. The bed's empty warmth tells me that Rose hasn't been awake for long. I hear the hangers moving in the closet and imagine she's picking out what to wear before she goes to shower and brush her teeth in front of a foggy mirror that she'll wipe with a wet hand. She'll crack the door a little to let the steam out and then she'll get dressed. After all she has to be ready by ten to get breakfast with Tyler Nishikawa.

I roll out of bed to get my own breakfast started. The kitchen tiles are cold on my bare feet, but it helps me wake up. I look through the pantry and see an almost full bag of potatoes. Since I've been cooking, Rose set up a grocery delivery service that comes every Thursday while we're at Hart to Heart. I take the bag out and set it on the counter, along with a can of beans. I grab some chorizo, sour cream, cheese, and lettuce from the fridge and set up my ingredients. The Warren's cooking instructor's voice never leaves my brain when I step into the kitchen.

Remember your Mis-en-place, Citlali.

How many potatoes can a single person eat? In all the years of being left home alone, you'd think I'd remember.

I chop a potato, because one per person should suffice. After oiling the pan and tossing in the chopped potatoes and chorizo, I turn to slice some lettuce into strips. It would probably be healthier to use some kind of dark leafy green, but I use iceberg instead. Something about self-sabotage feels appealing this morning.

I listen to Rose move around the house. She mutters to herself as she moves. Back and forth from her room to the bathroom. I wonder how many outfits she has gone through, but I don't risk turning to find out. Eventually she sits on the small bench by the door and puts on her shoes. Her phone vibrates gently. Then she takes a sharp inhale.

I turn and find her looking at her phone. “It’s Tommy. She’s asking for your number.”

I nod.

“Do you want me to give it to her?”

I nod. “That’s fine.”

She nods as well and taps on her phone. She faces the door, but doesn’t move to leave.

We watch each other. “Do you know where you two are going?” she asks.

“No, I guess it’s a surprise.”

“Oh.” She nods slowly. “She, um,” Rose lets out an awkward chuckle. “She didn’t mention Santa Monica Pier, did she?”

I shrug.

Rose’s nodding gets quicker. “Right, well if she does, say you don’t want to go.”

“Why?”

“Just, trust me.”

“Okay.”

“And bring a jacket, you know just in case it gets cold.”

“Okay.”

Rose stops at the doorway. She turns back to me and pushes her hair behind her ear.

Every time she’s done that at Hart to Heart headquarters, her mother has pulled it back out so it frames her face better. What a small thing to agree with Ishita Hart on. “I guess I’ll see you later,” she says, reaching for the door. “Have fun.”

I nod. “You too.”

The last sound is of the door closing. I find myself scraping the bowl a few more times just to fill the silence. My phone, thankfully, vibrates and I see what I assume to be Tommy's number.

[Hey, it's Tommy. 12:30 good?]

I type back an agreement and add her contact to my phone and bracelet before moving to wash the dishes. It's quiet, so I play an old song my grandmother would always play when she was cooking when I was little. It's in English and about wishing you'd never met someone. I turn and stare at the empty house. Usually when Rose goes on dates, I get back to working, planning out new dates and finding new ways to get Rose married. Basically, I work on my future freedom.

But instead of walking to the living room, I walk into Rose's room and get back into bed.

"Set alarm for noon today please," I say to the wall computer.

"Confirmed."

The bed feels bigger. Rose isn't here to take up space.

I roll into her side, but really it's all her side. Will this Ty Nishikawa get a side of this bed?

She picked this one, which means he has more potential than the others. She could stick with this one. She could marry this one. She could become Rosalie Anne Nishikawa-Hart and I could be free.

His smell could replace mine. And his clothes could be in Rose's closet, but they would be on separate racks. And he doesn't seem like the type who would cook for her. They would end up two sleep-deprived workaholics surviving on protein bars.

The thought makes me groan and I close my eyes, welcoming my nightmares to distract me.

The alarm rings before the torture in my dreams can make me scream. I walk to the shower and blast cold water, trying to mimic the waterboarding from minutes before. It stings and I sigh.

After the shower, I put some of my own clothes on. I don't even slide on Rose's softer socks like I have almost everyday I've been here. She has never complained. While I brush my teeth, there's a notification from my phone.

[Tommy: I'm outside]

I grab a jacket like Rose said and head downstairs. Outside, Tommy is sitting on a motorcycle. She smiles and holds out a helmet to me. "Don't worry, I'll be gentle."

"I've been on a bike before," I tell her as I pull the jacket on.

"Fine, then I won't be gentle."

Tommy drives us to a little Vietnamese place with a red awning and little twinkly lights that border the windows. It looks small from the outside but goes in quite far on the inside. The window says "Four Generations Strong," and for some reason that makes me smile. It seems like Tommy's here a lot, cause the owner of Pho Mai Cali squeals and goes to hug her the moment we step in.

"Haven't seen you in so long, Miss Thomas!" The woman looks to be about sixty, and I assume she's Vietnamese from the restaurant.

"Buses don't build themselves, Ms. Quan," Tommy says with a laugh.

“Yeah, yeah, but you’re not the one building them. You Crawfords only design them,” the older woman says, rolling her eyes.

“And manage them,” Tommy says with a smile.

The older woman laughs. “Same spot as always?”

“Yup, it’s the best spot.”

Ms. Quan leads us to a table next to a large waterfall structure. “I’ll be back in a little, Honey,” she says before walking away.

I turn to Tommy who opens up her menu. “Friend of yours?”

“This was mine and my dad’s food spot when I was a kid. And I’d come here in high school whenever I got a bad grade on a test in school.”

“Lawyers can get bad grades?”

“College isn’t for good high school students, it’s for the bad ones. But they let the good ones in cause they’re easy to control.”

I’m not sure what she means, but I nod.

“To be fair,” she adds, flipping through the menu. “I was still a nerd, but never about the things they wanted me to care about. And I passed the ACT.”

I remembered the Annexed College Test. One of the few ways annexed kids can win their freedom back. Pass the test and get free tuition and a stipend to be free. But it comes with the APE, the Annexed Physical Evaluation. If you pass the ACT you go to college. If you don’t but you pass the APE, you go into the military and get called an Ape for two years and often get the shit beat out of you. And after that you’re front of the line until you die or manage to survive ten years in the service.

Wrangled kids like me aren't allowed to take the test, but I wasn't much of a book smarts kid anyway. "Wait," I say. "Why did you take the ACT, weren't you free by then?"

"Yep," Tommy says flipping through the menu. "But I had once been annexed, so I needed to take the test according to law."

I doesn't exactly surprise me that there's another obligatory aspect to this law, but it still makes my stomach turn. "Did you get treated differently 'cause of it?"

"Yeah, they said it was unfair not to have student debt cause I was born a slave. My friend Zack got it way worse, but he never quite got over it. Now he sees annexation in this fucked up kind of a way."

"What do you mean?"

"He's for it."

"How? I mean, how are you for it when you know what it's like?"

She shrugs. "With Zack, I think he thinks if he can pretend not to be annexed long enough one day it'll be true. Maybe he'll get over it one or maybe not. Who knows." Tommy opens up my menu for me. "Know what you're getting?"

I shake my head and look over the menu. Most of the food looks familiar from Warren's cooking classes, and some from the few dining out excursions from my childhood. Eating out for five was expensive. I wonder, suddenly, if my parents take the boys out to eat now that I'm gone. How old are my brothers?

Ms. Quan comes back and asks, "Drinks to start?"

"You like Boba?" Tommy asks me. I nod and she gets us two Jasmine Milk Teas with Boba. "You need more time?"

I shake my head and order an all meatball pho. Tommy gets her usual, which Ms. Quan understands. She runs her hand over Tommy's hair before heading back with our orders. Tommy smiles and set her chin on her hands.

“So,” she says, a playful smirk on her face. “What's your sign?”

“What?”

“Queer culture. We ask everyone about their zodiac sign.”

“Oh, I'm a Taurus, I think. May tenth.”

“Sounds right,” Tommy shrugs, “I'm a Libra. Pretty accurate for a lawyer, I guess.”

“Is that why you picked it?”

Tommy shakes her head. “Nah, that's just fortuitous. No, I picked it to help out my mom. And to help all the annexed people still stuck in this bullshit.”

I remember Tommy mentioning her mom and the drama that surrounded her. “So what's the big thing with her?”

“What did she tell you?”

I shrug. “Not much actually. Just that she was the Gordon family annexed person.”

“That's basically half of it, but they think she's a manipulative social climber who failed at seducing Jacob Gordon and settled for sickly Edmund Crawford.”

“What actually happened?”

“Gordon got rapey, she tried to report it but she was property so nothing happened, then Gordon started saying all kinds of awful shit about my mom so much so that people started calling her Revolta.” Tommy looks up and Ms. Quan comes forward with our food. Tommy smiles until the older woman is gone then says to me, “People are awful.”

I nod but I don't know what to say. I want to tell her that I admire her that she's inspiring, but who cares about the opinion of a twenty-five year old annexed girl? "How did your mom even end up with the Gordons?" I ask instead.

"Mom lived on the reservation when the Tribal Annexation Law went into effect."

"The what?"

"The expansion of the Homeless Annexation Law that applies to government supported populations. Basically the tribes, people on American territories, and critically low income areas."

I blink at her. How many of us have they enslaved?

"Tribal annexation was made as a cultural initiative to educate the country about various tribes in the US by placing children in places as Annexed Living Artifacts. They'd learn about their stories, practices, rituals all with government funding into research and everything. In exchange they would work for museums, national parks, Boy Scout camps, and all that, just teaching people about themselves. It was originally just for kids, soon though, anyone on the Rez was fair game. And as our numbers drop so did the amount of land we were allowed to keep."

"So they basically screwed you guys over by pretending to help you out."

"Yeah, pretty much happens all the time."

Tommy says this so casually.

"What do they do on the territories?" At this point I'm too scared to know, but I still ask

"It's an opt-in program. They screw the economy up so bad that people have no choice but to be annexed."

"I guess I'm lucky, then. I just got sold to Rose."

Tommy shakes her head. “Just because it can be worse doesn't mean that you have to settle for something that's not okay. It can always be worse, but it can also always be better. We got to be honest about the badshit or else they'll kill you and say you liked it.”

“You come up with that by yourself?”

“Nah, that was Zora Neale Hurston.”

“Who?”

“Nevermind. Did you grow up here?” Tommy asks. I nod.

“Yeah good old Palo Verde.”

“You ever been back there?”

“Nah, never have the chance.” Warren's had field trips every so often, but never there, only to the zoo or aquarium. No one ever saw the irony in that.

“Do you want to?”

I shrug. I never thought about it. I wonder if Rose would let me if I asked. Something about the idea of Rose seeing my small house with my homophobic parents and my kid brother's makes me never want to remember my old house or childhood ever again. “Maybe it's better to let that stay in the past,” I say.

“So Rose is better than home?”

When she says it, I realize that in a way Rose is home. But I instantly feel like an idiot for thinking it. “Well you know her better than me, is she to be trusted?”

“She's young, mentally, sometimes I worry she'll hurt someone with her innocence,”

Tommy says. “And coupled with the fact that she's been listening to her Mom lately, I'm a little anxious.”

“There was a time she didn't listen to Ishita?”

“Oh yeah Rosalie Anne was a little rebel,” she says with a chuckle. “But she wants the company. I guess she wants to get a career and settle down as all rich girls want.” Tommy shrugs. “Still kinda hard to believe I guess.”

I think of Rose and the workaholic she is. It’s hard to imagine a Rosalie who isn’t completely obsessed with a job perfectly done.

“I don’t know. In hindsight, it really started around the time her dad died. He always said how he couldn’t wait to see what she did with the company.” Tommy shrugs. “Maybe she just wants to make him proud.”

Rose would pick the company. She would pick Ty. And I would pick my freedom.

Tommy drinks her Thai iced tea. “I can’t believe Rose bought you. Not you personally, just anyone. I never thought she would.”

It was weird hearing someone talk about Rose that way. So sure that she knew what Rose was like. If she couldn’t figure it out, what chance did I have?

Tommy nods. “Yeah, we’ve been friends since before I got my bracelet off.”

I look down at my own gold bangle.

“Did you know it’s not actually gold?”

“It’s not?”

“Nope, cuz gold is too soft and might break. My mom found out when she made my bracelet into a switchblade.”

“A what?”

“A switchblade,” she says again. “I show it to you but it’s kind of illegal,” she says like it’s no big deal. “But yeah, it’s gold-infused titanium. I always figured Ty would tell us but....” She just shrugs.

“Ty? Why would he know about that?”

Tommy sighs. “So the families all have a big company. Us, the Crawford's, work in transportation and infrastructure. Buses and trains and shit. Rose and the Harts are all about the heart and love stuff.” She kind of laughs but it's short. “And the Nishikawas are all about technology. Specifically annexation technology.”

I look down at my wrist and my shackle feels tighter knowing that Rose's new boyfriend made it. The person she's probably smiling at right now. The person she might leave with. The one she picked. “Can I ask you something weird?”

“You can, but I'll decide if I answer or not,” she says.

I want to ask if she saw it coming, if Rose and Ty have had this will-they-or-won't-they love that has been a thing for years, if she thinks they'll get married. But I can't so instead I ask, “Why are you friends with them?” But then it sounds rude so I add, “Just cause the whole annexation tech stuff seems a bit against your cause.”

Tommy lets out a deep breath and pushes her long hair away from her face. Eventually she shrugs and replies, “Habit, I guess.”

I nod.

“I probably shouldn't be,” she continues. “Especially Ty. He's always been pretty complicit and he's okay with it. But Rose isn't doing it on purpose. Well, she is now, but she wasn't before.” Tommy looks away. “But maybe this changes things.”

Rose had mentioned that she hadn't seen Tommy since last year's Gala. Is this normal best friend behavior? I haven't had one in so long, I don't remember anymore. “Adulthood is hard that way,” I offer.

Tommy nods and looks down at our mostly empty dishes. “Wanna get out of here? Go explore the shit world we’ve inherited?”

I put on a voice that’s not my own and I lie. “I have some stuff to finish for Ishita Hart. But this was fun, thank you.” I feel bad for lying, but I suddenly feel exhausted.

Tommy nods. “My pleasure. Let me pay and I’ll take you home.” She gets up and pays up front while I sit and think about the torture I’m about to dive into when I get back into Rose’s cold, empty bed.

“Hi,” I say as I slide into Ty’s car.

“Hey,” he says, straightening up a little bit more. He’s dressed slightly less business-like than usual. Ty has always been a suit kind of guy. The most casual thing we could ever get him to wear was a polo. Luckily for him the school uniform included a tie. But today, his tie is knit rather than silk, it looks like something City would wear.

“I always forget how fancy you dress,” I say.

“Gotta make the old man proud,” Ty replies with a small smile. Ty’s parents died when he was in eighth grade. But I never saw him cry about it, even at the funeral. He was a stark contrast to me who cried for weeks when my dad died, despite being a high school senior. But no, Ty’s only comment around the whole thing was, “I have to make them proud.”

“How’ve you been lately, Ty?” I ask.

He nods. “Good, we’re looking at some new prototypes at work. We have a few application methods, but we won’t make decisions for a while.”

When Ty starts talking about work, I have no idea what anything means, so I just nod and say, “Oh wow, that’s interesting.”

“Yeah,” he says with a bigger smile. “How about you? I forgot to ask last night.”

“Oh, you know. Work. Running the Hart to Heart Website. City.”

“The annex girl?”

Ty has never been very good at using annexed as a verb or adjective rather than a noun. Tommy has corrected him often, but he says it doesn’t matter and that’s what they use in the office, so it’s fine. But I can’t find it in me to make it a noun. Especially when I’m talking about City. “Yeah, I annexed her,” I say as Ty nods.

“Why did you get her?”

I let out a frustrated chuckle. “Ishita. Of course. She wants me to work on my social life. And says I need to be married before I can run the company.”

“Married?”

“Yeah, something about Hart to Heart’s image as a brand of love needs a couple. Blah blah, marketing, marketing.”

“So you’re not taking it seriously.”

I feel like I can’t tell him the truth, that I find this whole thing pointless and feel everyday that the computer was right and I am unlovable, but I don’t think Ty would understand. “I am, who doesn’t take love seriously?”

This makes his smile bigger. “So what does the annex have to do with this?”

“City.” I wait for him to repeat her name, eventually he gets the hint.

“City.”

“Well, City sets up the dates and schedules them and plans them out. Given how busy I always am at work, it really helps. And I like having her around. She’s really sweet and smart. It’s funny, I actually like the idea of coming home and having her there. It’s not so lonely anymore.”

“Well, glad to have a piece of my work close to you,” he says as he taps my wrist. When he looks away, I cover my wrist with my hand.

After brunch and a helicopter ride over the city, Ty’s driver takes us to the Observatory. It reminds me of that ancient movie Tommy used to like to watch with the white guy in a red jacket whose friend got shot by cops there. I’m not sure why Ty has brought us to the site of

Plato's death, but I don't say anything because he seems so excited. His smile never wavers as he gets us tickets or as we go inside.

"Do you remember?" he asks.

"Rebel Without a Cause? Yeah. Tommy was obsessed with that jacket and Natalie Wood."

Ty shakes his head. "No. Do you remember the first time we were here?"

I look around and try to think. "You mean the field trip?"

"Yeah," he says. I haven't seen him smile like this in years; it's hopeful and frightening.

I start to laugh. "Oh yeah that's when Tommy started yelling at the staff about using ALAs to mislead people into thinking Indigenous people wanted this tech, right?"

Ty looks at me with confused eyes, but shrugs. "That does seem like something she'd do, but that's not what I meant."

I think back, but all I remember is Tommy yelling about the TMT telescope in Hawai'i. I shrug. "I don't know."

"I'll jog your memory," Ty says confidently. He walks to the ticket booth for the planetarium movie. I look around as we stand in line. There's a group of kids walking around in matching t-shirts. All California schools require matching T shirts on field trip days.

Ty buys us two tickets to the next showing and we walk inside. The group of kids walk inside too. The kids are little. Two little girls, one with a ponytail and the other with braids, walk holding hands. It reminds me of Tommy and me when we were little. We spent most of our field trip together, despite being in different grades. Imperialis Academy took four grades on field trips at a time: grades two through five together, and grades six through nine, then the high schoolers all had one trip together, usually to other countries. This group looks about the same

size as ours, but it's clear this is only one grade from one school. Theirs must be from a public school. This is how City must've had school field trips. I imagine a tiny City. All smiles, running around and pointing at things. The idea warms my heart and I hope I can make her smile like that someday.

Ty takes my hand and pulls us to sit down. He doesn't let go of my hand when we sit. Why are his hands always cold? How are City's always so warm? I glance at Ty who is busy watching the commercials for shows at other museums. The aquarium is showing a documentary on the advancements in floating neighborhoods. The museum of Humanity's film is on the benefits of artificial blood. Then there's the commercial for the film we're about to watch, Discoveries in Moon Mining. Ty has always been into these technological advancements, but I've found many to be scary. It seems nothing can stop technology.

The movie starts and I glance to the side. I spot the little girls again, both sitting in chairs much too big for them. One stern little girl next to them holds a finger up at them, silencing them as the movie plays. I turn up to the movie, but my mind wanders back to memories of the first time I was here.

After the teachers calmed down her protest, Tommy went to talk to the annexed living artifacts. She told them how she was being raised to do the same, but she got adopted. She had just gotten her bracelet off and the light circle on her wrist hadn't tanned yet. She spotted me and pulled me towards the older indigenous teens. She introduced me as "the other kind of Indian." Before I could even react, a girl from another school group came up to Tommy and tapped her on the shoulder.

You can't say that, the girl said. She was in pigtails and a t-shirt that read KAM ACA program, Honolulu. I remember it was purple and had a palm tree and paddle on the front.

Why not? Tommy asked, hands on her hips.

It's racist. Don't use colonizer terms like that. Then she turned to me. *Do you know what your ancestors called themselves? It's okay if you don't.*

Gujarati.

She smiled and turned to Tommy. *Learn it, if she's really your friend.* Then the little girl turned and left. I noticed then that she and all the brown children in matching shirts had bracelets on. They all walked away and Tommy crossed her arms over her chest.

She turned to me and grumbled out an apology. *I'm sorry, Rose.*

I remember smiling and hugging her. It makes me smile again in the theatre. I realize suddenly that I haven't been watching any of the movie. To be fair, I don't want to. It's about carving up the moon and the new colonies of Moon People they've made from annexed laborers that work and live there.

It's not long after that the movie ends and the lights in the room go up. Ty is beaming again. "I never forgot how much you loved the moon that day," he says.

That's what it was. They used to have a moon exhibit. I wanted to spend the whole day there, just staring at the pictures of the moon. I'm surprised he remembered, I always thought Ty had a bad memory. "I can't believe you remember that."

"How could I forget? You kept dragging us to the room."

My memory paints it more like me whining until Tommy saw the pigtail girl go in and pulled me by the hand inside. Looking back now, she spent more time making faces at the girl than looking at the exhibit.

“So,” Ty says, and I realize I spaced off. “I got you this.” He holds out a long black velvet box. He opens it and inside is a shiny silver bracelet with little pink stones. “It’s made of lunar titanium and has pink sapphires imbedded into the metal so they’ll never fall out.”

I stare at it. The little chains on the sides, the two parts of the clasp. The fact that it’s a bracelet that can be removed. Luckily he expects me to be speechless.

“I take it you love it.”

I nod, hoping he’ll close the box. Instead, he starts to take it out. I stop him by grabbing his hand. “I want to save it for a special occasion.”

His face seems to fall.

“For another special occasion.”

Ty’s smile returns and he nods. “Yeah, good idea.” He closes the box and hands it to me, but moves to hold my hand so it’s awkward to put the box in my purse, but I manage. “Wanna go look around?”

I nod and we move towards the exhibit area. With every step my bag bumps against my thigh and it makes me think of City.

When I finally make it home, I lean against the door and let out a deep breath. I kick my shoes off and look for City. I find her in bed, asleep. It stops me for a second. Why didn’t she wait for me?

I shake the question away and go into the closet to find a spot for Ty’s bracelet. I put it near my dressy clothes in a drawer for accessories. I just don’t feel like explaining it to City.

I hear City start to groan and rush back into the room. “City, City,” I say, grabbing onto her shoulders and shaking them gently.

She starts to blink and look around the room.

“Was it another nightmare?”

City pulls away from me. “I’m fine.” She gets up out of the bed. I follow her as she steps into the kitchen and pulls the refrigerator door open.

“I ordered us pizza,” I say. “Should be here soon.”

“I can make my own food.”

“It’s for the both of us.”

“Tyler Nishikawa didn’t have dinner planned? Curious for someone who is supposed to help you with anything you need.”

“He did have dinner planned,” I correct. He had reservations at another fancy restaurant with fancy food and fancy people, but I just wanted to come home. So I asked to go home. “But something came up,” I tell City.

She says nothing and leans against the kitchen counter. She crosses her arms over her chest and doesn’t look at me. We stand there, neither moving and neither speaking. The sound of the doorbell makes me almost sigh in relief.

The doorman from downstairs hands me the two medium pizzas and leaves with a few polite nods. I carry the boxes into the livingroom and set them on the coffee table. “I thought peperoni would be a safe bet.”

She still doesn’t say anything, but she walks into the living room and takes a slice of pizza. She takes a bite and closes her eyes. After she chews and swallows she says, “I haven’t had pizza in years.”

This makes me smile and while we eat, the tension recedes. But then she asks,

“How was your date?”

I think it over. It was a bit over the top, but I didn't hate it. I forgot how nice LA looks from that high up. And the brunch was delicious. And he brought me a gift. It was everything a date was supposed to be. And I got to be with my friend. Isn't that what they say? That your love is also your best friend.

"Good," I decide, "it was good."

14 City

Fuck.

The week after my date with Ty is cordial. City and I get up and get dressed in sleepy quiet. City makes food quietly, soft songs play on her bracelet. Then we go to Hart to Heart where we work in my office, but don't talk much. Most of the sounds are the notifications on our various gadgets. Then we go home, strip down to pajamas in separate rooms and fall asleep next to each other. Instead of curling up against me, City just holds my hand when she gets into bed. By the time we wake up however, she's hugging me.

This morning, I wake up before her. She's been sleeping more, even without me there. I found her asleep after my date, she was twisting and groaning. It took more to get her to calm down. And yet even with these extra naps, she seems more tired. I wish she could just rest.

I run a hand over her cheek and get up to take a shower. The water is warm and I try to relax and focus on my second date with Ty today, but all I can think of is City and if she's going to spend the whole day asleep, letting her demons take over. What will happen if I marry Ty and I can't hug her while she sleeps anymore? How would I explain to my husband that I need to sleep with my annexed person?

I step out of the steamed shower and whip the mirror down with my hand. I look down at my phone that lights up with texts from Ty.

[Ty: I'm so sorry Rose, but I have to cancel today. They need me at work, but I wish I could spend the day with you.]

I type back a reply.

[Me: No problem, have fun at work!]

I nod and walk out to the room where City is staring at the ceiling still in bed. I climb in next to her. She arches an eyebrow at me and I smile as I curl into a pillow next to her.

“Morning.”

“What are you doing? You have to get ready for your date.”

“It just got cancelled. Ty has work, so I’m officially,” I try to think of the right word, “bored for the day.”

City nods then looks around a bit. “Do you want me to make you breakfast?”

I shrug. “Sure, but nothing fancy.”

“Toast okay?”

“Perfect.”

City and I get up from bed and walk over to the kitchen. I watch as always as City gets the food ready, first setting all the food out then starting to cook, which is just toasting bread and spreading butter on top, but still. She’s so meticulous and careful. Her fingers are gentle, I can’t imagine her being forceful and I wonder for a second what that would even be like. How was this precise cook a fighter once?

“What were you gonna do today?” I ask when City sits across from me. She brings a bowl of fruit along with our toast.

“I’m not sure. Usually, I’d make more date plans, but Mr. Nishikawa doesn’t seem to like them, so it seems I’m really out of a job.”

I remember how she used to be constantly on the Hart to Heart website, making notes and getting ideas. But there hasn’t been any activity on her files for weeks. I’m sad to think of them, abandoned in the digital universe. “How many have you made?”

City shrugs. “About twelve. Half are just different restaurants though.”

“Then let’s do them. You and me, today.”

“You want to go on a date?” City asks.

“Well not like a date date, but I just think since you planned so many that maybe we should go on some or like they should be experienced, you know?”

City makes a face at me. It moves from confusion to apathy and soon she’s shrugging. “Fuck it, why not?” she says. “I just have to make a few calls and get ready.”

I smile. “Cool.”

The first date we go on is to the aquarium. It’s not fancy, but we spend the whole time smiling. City spends the whole time picking her favorite fish in each tank. I spend time looking around at all the colors and trying to read their scientific names.

The next one is miniature golf. City has to use the child’s sized yellow put, which she only accepts because yellow is her favorite color. I get the taller pink put which we both decide suits me well even if my favorite color is black. City spends most of the time laughing at how precise I become when playing, measuring with my stick and calculating angles on my phone. But I end up winning so she accepts my method with another small chuckle. We stop at the food court and share some fries before our next date.

“Can’t cook on an empty stomach,” City says.

City found a place that offers hour-long cooking classes and got us a spot before we left the apartment. City promises she picked the easiest class: Stuffing Dates. City is precise and finishes early, the instructor is enamored by her and mentions on several occasions that he’d like to hire her. She just smiles and says maybe one day. He gives me his contact information. It’s a good idea for City’s future.

I'm a disaster. So City helps me, guiding my hands, helping me squeeze goat cheese into the dates and wrap them in prosciutto. In the end mine still look disastrous next to City's, but she's still proud of me and we wrap them all up for our last date of the day.

It's a picnic in the park. City asked Henry to pick us up a few things while we were in the class. She makes us some food as I watch the stage about forty feet away from us.

Every Sunday evening they have concerts by the Orchestra association. Today it's the Junior Public Orchestra. It's a sea of brown children playing old music and covers of newer and more modern songs.

City makes us sandwiches with various italian meats and an intricate olive oil spread that she had prepared at the grocery store beforehand. The eating portion is quiet because we're too busy with the food. And the music makes it easy to be so quiet.

I lay back on the blankets. The sun is warm enough to combat the breeze. We're far away enough from the stage to avoid the eco-friendly crowds, but close enough to hear the music I saw and close my eyes.

City's dates have been perfect. They're social yet private. Even Ty, who's known me for years, had some boring moments on his dates and some date spots that were too loud. City really understood the nature of dates and how to make was usually a horrible experience into something almost comfortable. But then the guys have to be total jerks. A date with City would probably be as close to perfect as I could get. But this isn't a date.

To be fair, out of all of them I had the most fun with Ty. We've known each other for a long time. And Tommy and I spent so much of our childhood with him. But I keep waiting for that spark. That thing that makes people certain they want to spend their lives with this one other person. What did that even feel like?

“City, can I ask you something?” My eyes are still closed.

“What’s up?” she asks.

“Have you ever been in love?”

There's silence for a long time. “Why?”

I shrug, but I can't tell if she's looking at me. “I don’t know. I just wanted to know if you knew what it felt like.”

City lets out a sigh. “I’m sorry. I don't know what love feels like.”

“It’s okay,” I reply.

“What about your parents?” City says. “Weren’t they in love?”

I laugh and finally open my eyes again. City is sitting with her arms wrapped around her knees and her chin resting on them. “No. I don’t think my parents loved each other. It was kind of an arranged marriage.”

“People still do that?”

I shrug. “I don’t think they ever stopped.” I sit up. “It was fortuitous they told me. My mom and my dad had good numbers and it made the company look good. But nothing my mother does seems to be by chance. She’s too calculating.”

Nothing about my mother has ever felt unplanned. Even my birthday and the fact that it’s in the summer. I felt as a kid that she was a god, and everything bent to her whim. For a time, I was scared she was the one who orchestrated my father’s death. But I soon realized, my mother simply never cries.

“How does it work?” City asks suddenly. She moves closer to me. She hesitantly lies down on the blanket. “The Hart to Heart algorithm, I mean.”

“I’m not really sure. I know it runs GPAs and fields of interests and credit scores and financial histories. It runs astrology and Myers Briggs personalities. It runs social media history and it only matches you with someone if you have an eighty percent compatibility or higher.”

City chuckles. “I thought you said you didn’t know.”

This makes me roll my eyes playfully. “I know the components, but I don’t know any of the math. My parents were, or are, I guess, really good at it. But my mom’s charts are meaningless to me.” I lay back and it’s not until I blink that I notice how close we are. We can’t bump noses or anything, but still, she’s close. A light pink colors City’s cheeks.

“Why do you want the company then?”

“I want to make people happy. And I dunno, love is fascinating.”

“How?”

“It doesn’t make any sense.”

This makes City laugh. Then because it sounds so nice, I start to laugh. We let it die down while it mixes in with the orchestra then gets overpowered by the music. We sit and listen for a while. The song is soft and calm, the opposite of me, but such a likeness to City. Calm and soft and strong. But City’s voice is quiet when she asks the next question.

“Do you love him?”

I turn to her and she’s staring at me intently. I shake my head, but say, “Not yet.”

“Do you think you will?”

For some reason this question cuts me deep. And for a moment, I worry that I won’t be able to fall in love with Ty. Yes, he’s handsome and an overall good guy, but something about him keeps me stuck on the ground when he’s asking me to go with him.

I let out a deep breath. “Yes,” I say. I don’t really have a choice.

16 City

The plan is to stay in bed while Rose is gone, but then I can't sleep. I lay in bed staring at the ceiling, letting my brain go in random directions. For some reason, I keep going back to what Tommy said.

So Rose is better than home?

Nothing has ever felt like home, not that I can really remember. But this spot here, in Rose's bed feels warm. Not just on my skin, but in my stomach too. But I have nothing to match it to.

I get out of bed and pull one of Rose's hoodies on before going down to Henry's office. He's surprised to see me, but has a polite smile as always.

"Can you give me a ride?"

"Is this the place?" Henry asks as he lowers the window and we both look up at the house. It's new and big and beige. The numbers match the ones I wrote down for Henry, but it's not what I remember. This is where my house used to stand.

"Yeah, this is it."

"It looks like it's for sale," Henry says. I turn and spot the same bulky real estate sign they've used for over a century.

I step out of the car and go to the sign to scan the information on to my bracelet. I look over the listing, but I can't find my parents or brothers names anywhere.

When did they leave? It's been almost ten years so I shouldn't be surprised. My brother Angel should be almost nineteen now and Gabe should be about seventeen. What city are they in? What school do they go to? Do they remember me?

Henry calls out from the driver seat window. “What is this place?”

I turn around and walk back to the car. “It’s nowhere,” I say.

He’s quiet for a bit, then asks, “Anywhere else you want to go?”

I shake my head and step into the car “I’m feeling tired I think I need a nap.”

He nods and drives me home.

The drive back is quiet, but Henry glances at me several times and plays songs from my bracelet history on the stereo. I know he’s trying to get me to smile.

“You know,” Henry says. “I’m glad you came into Miss Hart’s life. The circumstances are bad, but you two are good. Miss Hart is much happier with you around. She’s more rested. She’s not so lonely.” Henry pulls up to our building and turns to me. “I guess I just want to say thanks.”

I nod. “It’s no problem,” I say and get out of the car. “See you Monday,” I call as I leave.

“Bye City,” he calls back.

I wave to the doorman and the receptionist with lazy, tingly fingers. They call me by my name because, even though I’m a slave, my owner puts me at a higher rank than them. I make my way upstairs, replaying Henry’s words.

Does Ty make Rose happier and more energized? Are Ty and Rose good? Will Henry treat Ty the same way? Will they even keep Henry around or will Ty have his own driver?

I make it to the apartment onto the bed. Naps have become necessary when Rose is not around even if she doesn’t like it. The nightmares come back when she’s not around, but lately I found myself liking the torture.

I roll to my side and look at the blank wall. “What time is it?” I ask.

“It is 3:42 PM,” the wall says.

I watch as the numbers glow and for some reason I ask. “What access do I have again?”

“You have full access to the internet and all of Rosalie Hart’s files.”

“Do I have access to private internet browsing.”

“Yes. Would you like me to open a private window?”

“Yes.” A grey window opens with an icon of a lock with the words Private Browsing Access: Citlali Martinez Only written underneath. “Search Rosalie Hart,” I say.

A standard search page comes up with several links. The first is a standard bio of Rose. On the right side are several pictures of Rose smiling awkwardly in various situations. There’s one picture of her at a piano recital as a kid. I read over her bio. She is twenty four, born July 13th, 2075 in Los Angeles, California, USA. Height: 5’6’. Daughter of Nathaniel Hart (2045-2092) and Ishita Hart (nee Patel, 2052). Alma Mater: Stanford University. Graduated with Distinction and Highest Honors in Business, class of 2097.

“See images,” I say.

The wall is suddenly filled with pictures of Rose and I have trouble swallowing. I look at them one by one, too scared to make them bigger. Most of the pictures are from paparazzi and different events when Rose isn’t posing. When she does pose, she manages to smile a bit larger, but it never looks genuine. It is, nonetheless, pretty. I see a paparazzi picture of Rose, Tommy, Ty and a black girl I don’t recognize.

“Enlarge picture twenty four,” I say.

The picture is dated 2089. America’s future elite: the children of the some of the most powerful families in the US have lunch in Paris, reads the caption on the side. The picture is of them in a coffee shop, Tommy and the mystery girl sit next to each other on one side of the booth and Ty and Rose are on the other side. They’re all laughing, and I wish I knew what made

Rose laugh like that. I've never made her smile like that. The thought that I never will hits me hard in the stomach.

“Delete private browser and history.”

“Deleted.”

“Power down,” I say as I turn towards Rose's pillow.

I spot City rubbing her eyes over my computer screen in my office at Hart to Heart. I glance at her in time to see her yawn. I hide my own yawn in response and try to focus on my work. Instead of reviewing the latest proposed updates to the H2H website, I'm worrying over City's new sleeping patterns. Even though she's averaging twelve to fourteen hours of sleep a day, she seems more tired than before. And the exhaustion just leads to more sleep. She's caught in a weird cycle. I'm almost glad I don't have any plans with Ty for a while, so I can look after her. She is my responsibility after all.

My mother walks into my office. "Rosalie, can I speak to you a moment?"

"Of course, Mother," I say.

She sits down. "It seems things are going well with Mr. Nishikawa." My mother has known Tyler for years and still she refuses to use his first name.

I glance at City who looks at me at the same time before quickly looking back down at her work, a soft blush on her cheeks. I nod quickly. "Yes, things are going quite well."

"Good," my mother says. She turns to City and asks, "When is the next date?"

City looks up. "Mr. Nishikawa will be busy in Honolulu until next Wednesday. So it won't be until the eighth of May when he returns."

She nods, pursing her lips as she turns to me. "How convenient, the Honolulu meeting is on May third. Rosalie, you will go in my stead. You'll be able to meet with Mr. Nishikawa and our investors."

My eyes go wide. "You're letting me handle the Honolulu meeting?"

"Should I not?" she asks.

"No, I can handle it," I say quickly, before she changes her mind.

“Good. Take Citlali and Henry with you. I’ll have the names on the tickets changed,” she says as she gets up and leaves.

Once she’s out of the room I let out a squeal. “Oh my god City! The Honolulu meeting! No one but my mother takes those trips. My mom developed them, they didn’t even exist before my mom started working in Hart to Heart. Wow, this is amazing. She finally thinks I can do it.”

City gives me a small smile. “Congratulations.”

“You’re gonna love Honolulu, City. It’s beautiful. And we can go explore in my downtime. My mom, Belle, and I used to do that when I was little. There’s so much to show you.”

She nods. “Would you like me to tell Mr. Nishikawa about your new availability?”

I look down at my keyboard. Right this is for Ty. But the idea of sharing Honolulu with Ty and not City, makes me want to almost cry.

“Yes,” I say. “Yes, that makes sense.”

“Are you all packed?” My mother asks me as she sits down across from me in my office. It’s Friday and we fly out tomorrow evening to combat the jetlag. She’s been popping in to remind us about the flight and things to bring and to speak to City, going over procedures and whatnot.

City watches from her small desk setup in a corner of the room courtesy of Ishita. If it were up to me, City would have a large desk setup.

“Yes, Mother. Everything is ready for tomorrow's flight. In fact, the luggage is already in the car.”

“And Henry will be joining you?”

“Yes ma’am.”

“Good. Now, about the date,” my mother pauses to get her phone. “This will be the third one is that correct?”

I feel my face scrunch up as I try to count them.

“Yes,” City answers. “This will be the third date with Mr. Nishikawa.”

“Then it’s time for the next step.” Ishita says with a calm eye roll. I have never seen my mother roll her eyes but I’m smart enough to know not to ask.

“What do you mean,” I reply. I glance at City who, as always, pretends not to listen.

“Mathematically and socially, the third date is seen as a trial for sexual compatibility.”

I blink and hope I misunderstood my mother’s clinical explanation. “Sex? He’s expecting sex?”

“Without the quantified compatibility provided by the Hart to Heart, there is no other way of knowing without experimentation. People are often curious, and Mr. Nishikawa doesn't seem to stray from the curious nature of man.”

My mother doesn’t seem to realize how weird this conversation topic is and sits in front of me with perfect posture and no hint of awkwardness in her face.

I look at City, who seems to be having a hard time ignoring us. She makes eye contact with me and I feel my face blush before looking away. A second later, I glance back and she has pink cheeks too.

“Oh,” is all I can say.

“Sex is nothing to fret about, Rosalie. It can be a useful skill. In most cases it is the key element in securing a proposal and gaining leverage in a marriage, if you ever find the need.”

“I see.”

“Yes, so follow the three date rule and you'll likely be married in no time. Now, if you'll excuse me, I have a meeting.” My mother walks up to me and gives me a slightly stiff hug as always. “I'll see you when you return.” With that she is gone.

Rose is silent from the moment her mother leaves until the workday ends. “Let’s get out of here,” she says, her cheeks still pink. Just as I nod, I get a ding telling me Ishita wants me in her office.

“I just have to go to your mom’s office and we’ll go.”

Rose nods and pulls out her phone as I step out. Ishita’s office isn’t far from her daughter’s, but it’s not close either. I knock before she calls me in. She’s at her desk, leaning back on her chair, but when I walk in she straightens up again.

“What can I help you with, Mrs. Hart?”

“Rosalie is a few steps away from being married. Congratulations.” I just blink at her and she adds. “You’re that much closer to your freedom. It’s exciting.”

“Yes, it is exciting,” I say like I didn’t just remember that just now.

“So it’s crucial that you make this work.”

“Ma’am?”

“My daughter is different around you. She’s vulnerable. Men like vulnerable, especially in the bedroom.” She leans forward, setting her elbows on the table top and interlacing her fingers. “She needs to redirect that behavior from you to Mr. Nishikawa. You need to help her.” I can feel the entire weight her words. “Teach her to be seductive, of course, but, more importantly, to obey. Do this and your freedom is secured.” She pauses, giving me an evaluating look, before saying, “Enjoy Honolulu.”

Rose spends more time than usual on her phone on our way home. She can spend hours on that thing making plans to make other plans and tapping the screen to let people know she loves them but at the end of the day, especially one as long as this one, she usually puts it down.

Rose keeps to her phone the whole way up to our apartment. She almost walks into the door before I stop her. Then she almost falls on the couch before I catch her and finally take the phone from her hands.

“No, City,” she yelps, reaching for the phone.

I look at the screen and see two windows open. One reads “Three Date Rule” and the other says “Seduction 101.” I turn back to Rose who is bright red. She looks at me with sheer embarrassment and shame. Rosalie Hart, clearly, has never once not known how to do something.

“Look,” Rose says, beginning to pace. “I don’t really have experience, so I thought I should learn.”

“On this?”

She crosses her arms. “You can learn plenty of things off the internet.”

I shrug. “Sure, but this isn’t one of them.”

Rose rolls her eyes, “You can’t really get a tutor for something like this.”

I remember what Ishita told me and suddenly the words come out of my mouth before I can even realize what they mean. “I can teach you.”

“What? No. I’m not going to make you teach me the art of seduction.”

“Then don’t make me. Just ask.” I watch as Rose seems to wrestle inside herself. “The worst I could say is no.”

Rose shuts her eyes hard and mumbles out her request.

“I’ll help you,” I say, “but I need you to relax.” I pull her to the living room by a sweaty palm. I sit her down. “Always have them sit, it gives you an added power and helps you feel more confident.”

“Okay,” she says.

I nod and take my phone out of my pocket and pull up the playlist I’d been working on on the way here. In the car I was using my bracelet, but I can’t have the music so close to me in practice. I pray these songs can get me back into my seventeen year old mindset. Hopefully, these songs can make me forget that Rose is not some random woman who’s hiding me for the night. Maybe they can make me forget that I kind of care what she thinks of me.

The first song is very old, but oddly effective. It plays softly when I set my phone down on the coffee table. I turn back and lift her chin gently, so I can look into her eyes. I remember again how beautiful her dark brown eyes are.

“Relax,” I say, “trust me.”

She takes a deep breath and nods, “I trust you.”

“Good. Now, always try to maintain eye contact. That way they’ll follow your gaze. It helps you control the situation. Works if you lean in close too,” I say, doing what I tell her. Her brown eyes stare into mine, her pupils seems to get bigger. I slowly back away so I’m standing upright.

I keep looking at her in the eyes and I start rotate my hips slowly. “Everything about this is slow,” I say. “You wanna build up desire. Build up need.”

Rose nods, trying to look me in the eye, but she glances down at my hips every few seconds. She stares as I run my hands over the buttons of my shirt and trace down to the hem.

“You wanna take it off or keep watching?”

“Huh?”

I hide the smile that wants to poke out of the corners of my mouth. “That’s something you can say. Helps you figure out what they’ll be like in bed. If they want to do it, they’ll usually be more dominant. If they want you to do it, they tend to be a bit more submissive.”

Rose nods quickly after a gulp. “Okay.” Her cheeks are red and her eyes keep moving from my body back to my face.

“How about I keep the clothes on for the lesson,” I assure her. I figure she’s nervous enough.

“No,” Rose says. “It, uh, you know? It has to be authentic. So do it exactly how it needs to be done.”

I look at her with an arched eyebrow.

“Exactly,” she says again with a nervous nod.

I nod and slide my hair out of its bun, it falls in loose waves. Rose stares as I push it back and toy with a strand all the way to the tip.

“Your hair is really nice,” she says.

“Thanks,” I say. “It likes your shampoo.” I bring my hands to the hem of my vest and unbutton the bottom button. Rose stares as I make my way up, unbuttoning the vest. “You might have a quicker time with this. Since I doubt you’ll be dressed like a boy.”

“You’re not dressed like a boy,” Rose says. “You’re dressed like you.”

This comment makes me gulp. It’s harder now to pretend I’m only doing this for work and not for her appraisal. Like I don’t constantly wonder how much I’m worth to her. I shake the thoughts away and take off my vest. When it hits the floor, it’s louder than I expected and it makes me jump a little.

“Are you okay?” Rose asks, leaning forward. She has that protective look on her face that makes me wonder, for just a second, if she could ever love me back.

Wait, love me back?

“City?”

I get pulled out of my thoughts. “I’m okay,” I say before pushing her back against the couch. “Keep them from moving forward,” I say.

She nods and goes back to her studious posture.

I move to undo my tie. I stare at it, untying it while trying to restrain my feelings for my owner. When it’s done, I slide my tie slowly. It’s then that I realize my shirt is the only thing keeping my scars hidden. Scars I didn’t have to explain to the women I stayed with because I didn’t have them. I move my hands to my belt and glance at Rose. She’s captivated, but also has a look of confusion.

“Just wear a dress and you won’t have to worry about the order you take things off,” I tell her.” She nods and goes back to studying me. When my slacks fall to the ground, she stares at my thighs, but her eyes soften. I look down and see scars on my thighs, one I tried and succeeded to forget.

“Boys,” I say, before setting a hand on her cheek. “Eyes on mine,” I remind her.

She swallows back her frown and nods again.

“I’m gonna get on top of you, is that okay?”

“It’s part of the lesson, isn’t it?”

“It doesn’t have to be,” I tell her. “I don’t wanna put you in a position where you’re uncomfortable.”

Rose shakes her head. “You didn’t, my mom did with her three-date bullshit,” she says with a chuckle. She sighs a little and bites her bottom lip, looking away from me. “And I’m not uncomfortable. I like it. Learning is fun, you know?”

I nod and touch her shoulder, pushing her gently, so she’s all the way back on the couch. “Still okay?”

“Yes.”

I lift my leg to straddle her on the couch. She looks up at me. Her pupils are big, making her brown eyes look even darker. She goes still.

“You left your shirt on,” she says.

I look down at it and take a deep breathe before I start unbuttoning it.

“You don’t have to,” she says.

I imagine her kissing my scars. Making each memory disappear under her lips. Then I imagine her carrying me to bed and kissing every part of me and making me disappear under her lips. A small display of love. A worthy end to a shit life.

I shut my eyes hard. “I want to,” I mutter.

She nods. “Okay.”

I unbutton my shirt, my fingers tremble. When I undo all the buttons, I can’t bring myself to open it. I just stare down at my scar. Then I see Rose’s hesitant hand take a hold of my open collars and pull them to the side. I close my eyes as she does. I can hear her swallowing a few times.

“Can I...?” She doesn’t finish, but I nod.

Her fingers trace over my scars. She traces over the small ones and traces the border of the bigger one. She runs her thumb over the small circle on my stomach. "I'm so sorry, City," she says softly.

My lip trembles, but I push away my feelings and pull my shirt off. "Depending on their response to the clothes question, you can play up either role. Dominant is more straightforward." I grab her chin like I'd grab her throat in other circumstances. "Just take the reins."

Rose stares at me, her pupils getting bigger. "Uh huh," she manages to get out.

"Just display dominance quickly and pull them to the room. And you're fucking a guy so chances are he'll take the reins again once you get to the room." I can't help but notice how bitter my voice is, but also how Rose's eyes react to my statement. Her pupils get smaller. I clear my throat and speak again. "Submission is kinda the opposite. It's a kind of vulnerability, a trust that you give to the dominant."

I slide my fingers gently along her cheek and down her neck. I trail a line down her chest with a finger then trail it back up. I tap her nose with the same finger then touch her lips lightly. She parts them automatically, and I glance up to see her pupils are big and dark. I look down at her lips and realize how badly I want to kiss them.

Instead, I lean into her and hide my face in her neck. Her arms are wrapped around me in a second as if on instinct. This is how we sleep. Me, protected and cradled. I sneak a look up at her, like I have every morning, but this time she looks back at me. Her brown eyes send sparks to my stomach.

I try to play with the ends of her hair, but I accidentally let out a yawn and my hand lands on her shoulder.

“You can,” my voice betrays just how tired I suddenly feel, “play with their shirt or...” My fingers trail lazily over Roses chest and down the middle. “And you can kiss their neck.” I do so, softly as my eyelids become heavy. “So you seem,” another yawn, “just innocent enough.”

Rose runs her hand over my arm. Through my blinking eyes, I can see her watching me. She stares down and runs a thumb over my cheek. My eyes close, my body already knows this hug and knows that it means sleep. I feel Rose’s thumb run over my cheek again as I fight the losing battle to stay awake. I think I feel Rose kiss my forehead, but the sleepiness is too strong to tell. Then she gets up and carries me to the room.

Watching City's eyes go wide when we land feels, for a moment, like it's going to be the best part of the trip. She stares at everything in sight. Stares at the mountain, stares at the trees, stares at the buildings. Most of all she stares at the ocean. "It's so blue," she says softly.

When we get to the Royal Hawaiian Hotel, she stares again. There is a fountain in front of the hotel, making a roundabout where Henry stops the car. He whistles when he gets out to help the bellboys. "You sure travel in style, Miss Hart," he says, nodding up to the hotel courtyard.

"This is Mrs. Hart's choice, actually," I say. He smiles and goes to help with the luggage. We don't have much, but Henry's always liked to keep busy. City and I walk to the front desk to check in. After the formalities, I give Henry his room key and head up to get City settled before my meeting.

"You're jumpy," City says as I fix my hair in the mirror.

"I'm not jumpy. I'm just a little nervous. This meeting is pretty crucial."

"What's it even about?"

"Basically advertising. Deciding which hotel getaway packages we're gonna feature on our top five most romantic vacations of the year. We've been doing this for years, but it's only ever been my mom judging. And now...."

"It's you."

I let out a quiet breath.

"Yeah, it's for me to decide. And I'm pretty sure my mom will murder me if I fuck it up."

City nods. "That is a possibility. How does it work?"

“So each hotel sends their marketing team and they have twenty minutes to convince me that they deserve a spot.” I step out of the bathroom and say. “It’s a bit nerve wracking.”

“I bet.” I look and see City rocking on the couch. “Do you want me to come with you?”

I’m dying to say yes. “I can’t ask you to spend your day off stuck in a ballroom listening to a bunch of old white men trying to sell shit.”

This makes City laugh. “Yeah, that sounds awful. But we can talk shit in between and it might help you narrow down your search to have someone to bounce ideas off of.”

She has a point, and she’s mentioned having a great bullshit detector. May as well test her ability to detect fraud. “You sure you don’t want to go to the beach instead?”

“I can go tomorrow,” City offers. “Give me two seconds to change.”

City emerges from the bathroom looking like a 1950s French school boy. “Mkay,” she says with a hair tie in her mouth as she braids her hair. “Let’s go.”

I nod and grab my things, as well as her tablet and slide them into my briefcase. We walk out and get into the elevator. City notices one strand is loose from her braid and goes to fix it.

“Leave it,” I say. “It looks good like that.”

City blinks at me then nods.

We step out and I lead us to the ballroom where a few tech people are setting up. They are slightly darker than us and all have bracelets like City’s on. They don’t smile at us as we walk in.

I lead City to our spot, so we can settle in for the next few hours with few breaks between clients. I send her a copy of the itinerary so she can follow along and know names.

“These are really ritzy,” she says as she scrolls through them.

“You know rich people.”

“Yeah,” she says. “I’m starting to.”

“Bask in calm, crystal blue waters with the love of your life. Rediscover the soft sands of paradise. Find yourself on sacred mountains of chiefs long ago. Take control of your destiny at Diamond Sands Resort.”

As the video concludes, City’s text shows up on my screen.

[City: God this one is torture.]

I hide my smirk and type back as the men try to describe romance as a thing of the past and thus we must bring the past to the future.

[Me: I don’t know why men love the past so much, like a bunch of people weren’t dying.]

City’s text pops up.

[City: That’s exactly why they like it.]

I glance at her and she shrugs. I look back as one man is saying, “The huts still have internet, AC, and plumbing, but offer that *feeling* of returning to nature.”

I type back to City.

[Me: What do you think? Should we cut them off?]

[City: I think they’re wrapping up.]

Lo and behold, City is right and the men stand straight, looking expectantly.

“Thank you for your offer,” I say and they stroll confidently out of the room. The moment the door closes, I let out a deep breath.

“Wow,” City says. “How are any of them are married?”

I shrug. “If you think of marriage as more of a business, it makes more sense.”

She nods, then gets up and stretches. “We have a fifteen minute break right?”

I double check my itinerary. “Yeah.”

“Okay good, where is the bathroom around here?”

“Turn left and walk down the hall. It’s pretty evidently marked,” I tell her. She nods and steps out.

I sigh again. We have five more presentations to deal with. The last third of the bunch. Just about two hours left. I realize I’ve been sitting for about three hours, except for the first break earlier, so I decide to get up and walk a bit. While I’m pacing in the hallway, I hear,

“Rose!” It’s Ty in a black business suit. He walks up to me and gives me a hug and a small kiss on the temple. “How are you?”

“I’m pretty good, just a little tired. These presentations really take a lot out of you.”

“Oh yeah, you’re doing the getaways, aren’t you?”

“Yeah. Just five more to go then some quality relaxing time. What are you doing by the way?”

He shrugs. “Just a meeting to discuss new updates to the annexation bracelets.”

“Update? What else could you possibly update? The battery literally runs until the person dies.”

“Oh, Rose, this is when we add new functions. Like, there’s a possibility we can administer servitude therapy from the bracelets alone, so they won’t need to be returned to facilities when they get out of hand.”

I’m not sure if he means the people or the bracelets, but in both cases, I become aware of the fact that his hand and its naked wrist is on my arm. “Oh.”

“I know, it’s pretty genius. It brings the tools to the people who know them best, their owners.”

Somehow I feel unqualified to be called the person who knows Citlali Martinez best. “That’s uh,” I can’t find the words. “Wow.”

He nods with a smile. “I’ll let you get back. Oh hey, did Diamond Sands already present their pitch?”

“Yeah, they just went actually.”

“I really like it. A friend from college is in the company and told me about it. They really keep all the best parts of the past and just make it better.”

I’m about to ask what he means, but I look to the side and see someone talking to City. “Excuse me,” I say. An older woman is pointing at City and then at her bags. City seems to be trying to explain that she is not annexed to the hotel. I walk up to them and ask, “Excuse me, ma’am, what are you doing?”

The later middle aged woman looks first at my wrist then up at my face. “Oh, thank you, could you get this annex to take my bags upstairs?”

“Ma’am, neither of us work for the hotel.”

The woman just scoffs. “Hello, she has a bracelet,” she says like I don’t know what’s going on. “So she’s an annex, so she should be able to take my stuff up shouldn’t she?”

“She’s with me. And that’s annexed person. It’s an adjective not a noun.”

The woman laughs out loud. “You can’t afford an annex. I bet you’re not even allowed to be in here. I’ll call security.”

Before she can, a hostess walks up to us. “Miss Hart, your clients are getting ready for your meeting. You and Miss Martinez should return to the ballroom.” She then turns to the

woman who has become even more pale, if you can believe it. “Please ask for help from any annexed person in an aloha shirt. Miss Martinez only answers to Miss Hart.”

With that, I pull City by the hand and we walk back to the ballroom. Once inside, City says, “Thanks.”

“No problem.”

“I didn’t think she’d think you worked there too.”

“Being rich rarely stops racism,” I tell her and we sit down as the next group walks through the door.

After a late lunch at the hotel restaurant and a stop upstairs to change, City and I make our way down to the pool. She steps in, hesitantly at first then dunks her head under. I’ll never understand how she can dive into things even when she’s nervous. It’s enviable.

“This is so weird,” she says with a laugh when she emerges. She starts walking around in the water. Her fingertips barely graze the surface of the water. “I haven’t been in a pool in years.” I study her. She insisted on a one piece, though it doesn’t cover the scar on her chest. She doesn’t care about that one, she cares about the small round one on her stomach. *That memory hurts way more*, she said when we were shopping.

“You do know how to swim though?” I ask from my spot at the edge of the pool.

“Enough not to die,” she says with a shrug and a smile. “Am I restricted from the deep end?”

I consider it. It’s only six feet deep, but that’s still over a foot taller than City. “It’s that or I have to save you, I guess.”

She seems to blush. “That won’t be necessary, Ms. Hart.” She nods toward the tablet balanced on my knees. “What are you reading?”

“Not reading, just looking over the Hart to Heart website.”

City blows a raspberry. “You work so much for a rich girl.”

“No, I don’t.”

“If I were as rich as you are, I’d never work as much as you do. Always on your phone or tablet, or big wall computer. Even on vacation.”

“This isn’t vacation, it’s a work trip.”

“Funny, last I checked this is a pool, not an office. Unless you’re incapable of lightening up.”

“I can totally lighten up.”

“Of course, digital princess, you can leave your romance kingdom.”

“I can.”

“Yup.”

“I’ll have you know I like my job.”

“Uh huh.” City makes small splashes with her fingertips as she looks out to the ocean.

I let out a frustrated sigh. “What would you suggest I do?”

City turns to me. “Step one: put the tablet on the chair.”

I reach over and put the tablet safely in my bag on the chair. “Okay what next?”

In response, I’m hit in the face with a splash of water. I nod while I wipe my face with my hand. City laughs as she backs away from me. “Okay, City. I see how you want to play.”

I splash her and her laughter never stops. We go back and forth and soon I'm laughing too. The water feels so nice raining over us, fighting away the heat, pushing away the stress from earlier. It's just us two surrounded by water, free from all the troubles from before.

Then City's bracelet dings. "Wait, wait, truce," she calls out. She goes back to sit on the steps and see what it is. "Oh, Tommy's in town."

"Oh," I reply. "What did she say?"

"She invited us to a conference tomorrow. What's that?"

I sit down next to her. "It's when college students and other academics connect their work to the real world. It's basically proving that what they're doing matters."

"That sounds pretty cool, actually. You wanna go?"

I run my hand through my wet hair. "I have that third date with Ty, actually." I nod and City copies me. "But you can go and tell me about it after."

"Yeah, probably better than being alone," she says with a laugh, but I'm concerned she's not joking.

"Yeah, you should go."

"I think I will," she says and replies to Tommy.

I run my fingers over the water as she does. But then, because I can feel her looking at me, I hug my knees and turn to City.

"Are you nervous?" she asks.

"About tomorrow?"

She nods.

"Terrified."

City grabs my hand under the water. Even in the water, she feels soft and warm. “It’s gonna be fine. He likes you, so you’re already ahead of the game.”

Game. In every game there’s a winner and a loser. The dating game. Does that one have a clear winner and loser too? If Ty wins, would I lose? What would be winning anyway? For Ty maybe it’d be that horrendous, past-obsessed getaway. If that’s winning, I’d lose for sure.

The feeling of City loosening her grip pulls me away from my thoughts. “No,” I say holding on tighter. “Don’t let go.” I look up and find City staring at me.

There’s water dripping down her chin. I watch as the small droplets fall one by one into the water. Something tells me to run my thumb over the back of her hand, so I listen. Then something tells me to lean in towards her, so I do.

“He’s going to love you, Rose,” City says. “He’d be an idiot not to.”

I let go of her hand and lean away. “Yeah,” I agree. “Idiot.”

20 City

I hear a knock at the door and call out, “You’re registered, scan your wrist.”

Tommy walks into the suite a second later. “I forget how Hart likes to travel. Her mom’s always making her get suites and shit.”

“That sounds like Ishita Hart,” I call from the bathroom. I walk out and see Tommy staring at the unmade bed.

“Is Rosalie forcing you to do anything you don’t want?” she says it like something she hoped she would never have to.

“What?”

Tommy nods to the bed.

I shake my head. “No, I get nightmares.”

“Nightmares?”

“Yeah. They go away if she hugs me. I dunno why, but it works and it keeps her on a regular sleep schedule too.”

“So you’re not...?”

“No,” I reply. “It’s just sleeping. Totally platonic.”

Tommy squints her eyes at me then types out a quick text on her phone. “Okay, you ready to go?”

I look over my shorts and t-shirt ensemble. “You said nothing fancy right?”

“Yeah,” she laughs. “We’re just going to go listen to a bunch of broke grad students.”

The campus is green. But we don’t get enough time to appreciate it before Tommy rushes us to the conference room. The only other place I’ve seen with so many brown people at once

was at Warren's. At the front of the room, there are four people standing on a small platform behind a long table.

"You hungry?" Tommy asks. "They have some snacks, but we're probably gonna get some food after."

"I can snack."

"Okay, you get whatever you want. I'm gonna go say hi real quick. Be right back."

Tommy goes to the platform and everyone looks at her with a big smile. I pick a few things, but mostly I watch her with all these people. They laugh like Tommy's always been around. Soon, Tommy comes back and we find a spot to sit. I pick up the flyer from the chair and look through it.

Twelfth Annual Conference on American Neo-Annexation

Speakers and Topics

Kekoa Cravalho, "The Second Coming: The Kanaka Apocalypse of Annexation"

Keio Reeves, "Annexed Cultural Ambassadors and the Commodification of Hawaiian Culture"

Penelope Garcia, "'They Chose to be Deadbeats': Annexation and the Rhetoric of Choice"

Paris Giang, "ASC 2.0: The Unannexed Settlers"

Zachary Taylor, UCLA "Economic Benefits and Disadvantages of Annexation Moving into a New Century"

"Oh shit," I hear Tommy say. She's looking at the doorway. I follow and see someone who looks eerily similar to me. She's taller than me, and darker, but still we have similar features. She notices me and I can tell she sees our similarity as well. She even arches an eyebrow at me before walking to the long table at the front of the room.

"Who is that, Tommy?"

“That’s Paris.”

“All I’m saying is there are economic benefits to annexation,” Zack says. After the conference, Tommy’s friends were having a small get together in one of their apartments. And even though they already spent two hours presenting papers on the subject, Penelope, Zack and two other master’s students keep talking about annexation.

“Economic benefits? At the cost of more black and brown bodies, you mean?” Penelope asks.

“It’s just the way the world works. Better to be annexed than dead. Besides, Annexation wasn’t designed to attack people of color. It was made to rehabilitate the economy through assisting unemployed workers rebrand themselves as lucrative employees to companies.”

The Penelope girl rolls her eyes. “First of all, annexed people are not ‘employees’, they’re slaves. And second—”

“Under federal law—”

“Wait your turn, Zachary,” Tommy says.

“Secondly,” Penelope continues, “The only reason they did that was because society doesn’t know what to do with people who aren’t working. They see no value in anything but labor. Then productivity carries this moral status, and a good day is only a productive day.”

“And racism has always been a part of the economy,” adds another person whose name I don’t know. I remember them hugging Tommy though, so I’m assuming they’re good people.

Zack leans back confidently. “We can’t deny annexation has stabilized the economy, which an indentured-servants-based model would never be able to replicate. The cost is too high.”

“Well, as we all know, in this country, freedom is a luxury good, Zachary,” Tommy chimes in from her spot on a couch, where she sits with Keio and Kekoa, talking about something else. The three don’t weigh in on the back and forth between Penelope, Zack, and two other people I don’t know. Whenever I hear bits of their conversation, it’s always words like “apocalypse” and “indigeneity” and “white people did that already anyways.” I want to listen to their conversation instead, but I’m worried I won’t understand. “And the ACT is trash.”

Zack glares at Tommy who just smirks and goes back to her conversation. “I hated that test,” she tells the two Kanaka men.

“For real,” Keio agrees.

I remember then that Tommy had mentioned a friend she met through the ACT program in undergrad. Was this the same Zack Taylor that was born into annexation. He glares at me like I figured out his secret and I better not fucking say anything.

Penelope’s voice calls my attention. “Economically stable does not mean right. If we don’t change, we’ll just keep repeating the same mistakes and give them new pretty names.”

Zack looks at me suddenly. I know he sees the expensive clothes on my body right next to the gold bracelet on my wrist.

“Then ask someone who is annexed and happens to be having a way better life now than if she was free,” Zack says. “City.”

I look up.

“What do you think about all of this?”

They all look at me. All these school kids who’ve never been anything but school kids. These kids who know more about my own life than I do. Know about the statistics I’m supposed to be a part of. But I don’t know what I’m supposed to say.

“Leave her alone,” a voice behind me says. “You expect her to weigh in on your theoretical debates without access to your years of institutional learning? You’re all shit allies if that’s the case.”

I turn and see the girl. The last panelist. Paris Giang.

The others go back to what they were doing, a few mumble out apologies.

“Thanks,” I tell her.

“No worries. These kids get a bit intention over consequence and forget that their theories are rooted in people’s lives. Wanna get some air?”

I nod.

We walk out to the lanai as they call them here. “So you know Tommy?”

“Not well, but yeah. She’s my owner’s best friend.”

Paris makes a face. A small smile and wide eyes. “Rosalie Anne.”

“You know her?” I ask.

“Not sober,” she laughs. “But yes, I know the repressed little one.”

Repressed? “What do you mean?”

“Are you queer?”

I look around at the exits.

“Most of us are,” Paris adds. “It’s safe here.”

I nod. “I like girls”

“Same.” She sips from her drink. I randomly realize how weird it is to be the same height as the person I’m talking to. “And so does Rosalie.”

I chuckle, but I don’t know why. “Where’d you get that idea?”

“She kissed me. A couple years back in Paris.”

“Is that that trip Tommy’s always talking about?”

“That’s the only time they went to Paris together. It was for Tommy’s twenty-first birthday. But Rose was only eighteen, so Tommy just flew somewhere where Rose could drink.”

“So she was drunk. That’s classic straight girl behavior.”

Paris makes a slight nod that tilts to the side. “True, but have you looked into her eyes when she’s sober? She has this longing. It’s like she doesn’t even notice that she wants it, but she still does. Have you seen it?”

I look out, away from Paris and shut my eyes hard. Rose’s face flashes in my memory and I shove away the feeling of realization. She’s straight. She’s getting married. “I haven’t,” I tell Paris.

“Hm. In any case, I don’t know many straight girls who drunk-kiss girls then cry and babble in French about how pretty you are and how sorry they are.”

“French?”

Paris takes it as a question. “Yeah. French, the international language of Lesbians.” She shrugs. “Rose started in Kinder and my dad is just real Indochina that way.”

I nod and stare out at the ocean. It barely pokes out in the skyline of giant buildings that cover the horizon. The ocean view is just for the tourists it seems. I focus on the sunset. It’s as bright red as I feel. My hands tingle, but I can’t ball them into fists right here, right now.

“You don’t think she’s some kind of queer?”

It doesn’t matter. “She’s getting married to a guy,” I say. “And when she does, I’ll get my freedom. And that’s all that matters.”

“Yeah. That is all that matters,” Paris agrees. “I’m a get a drink, want me to bring you something?”

I shake my head. I hear her close the sliding door.

I ball my hands into fists and slam on the cement wall that keeps us from falling down the mountain. I spin the bracelet and see nothing. No scratch. No dent. I slam it again, trying to crack it in any way. I slam harder and harder until I hear the door again and hide my hands behind my back.

It's Tommy. "Hey, is this where the real party is at?"

I shake my head. "Can you take me home?"

"Sure, you okay?"

I nod. "Jet lag."

Tommy nods. When she's driving in the car, I look down at the bracelet. It's shiny and golden as always. My wrist is purple under the perfect shackle.

His hotel room is cold. In all the years I've known Ty, he's never been one for the cold. But now, he dresses like his father in thick, layered suits, so this probably more comfortable. I hear Tommy in the back of my mind commenting on how expensive his business aesthetic is on air conditioning and on the environment. Silently, I agree.

The cold also make it hard to want to be naked with him.

Tyler unbuttons his blazer and hangs it on the coat rack. "It feels nice in here and doesn't it?"

"It's a little cold," I admit.

"I can warm it up if you like," he says.

I look down half because I'm uncomfortable and half because whenever I see City do this, it shoots into me, so maybe it'll do the same for Ty. "Maybe we could work together and warm eachother up."

It's a stupid line, I know it's a stupid line, but when I look up Ty looks at me like he finally got the promotion he's worked years for.

I remember City and walk up to him never breaking eye contact. His pupils are like City's, big and dark. I set my hand on his chest and feel his heartbeat. It's fast and I'm annoyed that I don't know City's heartbeat for reference. Is it supposed to be fast? Is hers ever fast around me? At this point I slide my left hand down his arm and hold his cold hand. City's had been warm.

I pull him to the couch and reach up to his neck, pulling him in for a kiss. His lips are as soft as City's, but something tells me they are not as skilled. His tongue pokes shyly at my lips,

but I don't give in. *Make him wait*, City's voice reminds me in my head. I pull away and sit him down.

I pull my phone from my pocket and I find the playlist City made for me. I don't know any of the songs, but they remind me of City's hips. So I move my hips the way I remember.

Ty stares and I swallow down the giggle in my throat. It's actually working. His fingers twitch as his hands rest on his knees. He grips his pants a bit as I slide my dress up my thighs and keep dancing slowly. I wonder if I had done that when City was dancing. I can't remember. All I remember are her hips and her biting her lip. I try that and hear Ty's breath hitch.

"Do you want to take it off or should I?" I ask.

Ty stands and kisses me again. This one a bit more rough than before. He walks us to the bedroom and sits me down on the bed, still kissing me. He unbuttons his shirt then cups my face for another hard kiss. I imagine City doing this with one of the random women she used to stay with and an anger bubbles in me. I use it to match Ty's roughness. I push his shirt off and pull him closer. I wonder if which role City would play: dominant or submissive. Better yet, I wonder which one she prefers.

Ty pulls away and helps me out of my dress. I watch him look me over, but the intensity scares me. It looks familiar, but it doesn't feel right. I ignore it and kiss him with my eyes shut.

Ty climbs on top of me. It reminds me of when City sat on me.

Is that okay?

Ty doesn't ask. He's heavy and has pants on. And his body is hard. City had been soft.

Ty looks down at me and runs a thumb over my cheek the way I did with City that night when she fell asleep in my arms. Then he kisses me and I wonder what it'd be like to kiss City. I wish I was kissing her.

“Wait,” I say pushing Ty away and sitting up.

“What? What’s wrong?”

I look down away from him. City. I’m here making out with a guy, with Ty, and all I can think about is City and wanting to kiss her.

Do I like her?

“I have to go.”

“Are you okay? Did I hurt you?”

“I’m fine, I’m just,” I try to find the right words. Do I tell him he sparked my lesbian awakening? Bisexual? I don’t know. “I just have to go,” I say.

“Did something happen?”

I pull my dress back on and grab my phone and bag. “I’ll text you later, I just have to go.” And with that I leave his cold suite. I go to the elevator and get down to the lobby where I text Henry. I lean against a cold wall and wait for him.

I can’t have a thing for City, she’s a girl. I don’t feel things for girls. Nothing substantial. Nothing real. They’re just pretty. And City is pretty. Beautiful. Gorgeous. Breathtaking. But that’s objective. You’d have to have your eyes closed not to see that. And even then, you could feel it.

She’s also strong and sweet and I want to protect her and make her smile.

Fuck.

I get a text from Henry that he’s outside. As I walk, I try to swallow my feelings about City. But she keeps showing up in my head over and over.

“Is everything okay, Miss Hart?” Henry asks.

I nod and sit in the backseat. As we drive, City returns to my imaginings. Along with fantasies of kissing her lips and cheeks and scars. I remember the day after my first date when City with sleepy eyes came to the door. I imagine her in my arms.

My phone vibrates and I see a text from Ty.

[Ty: I had a really good time tonight, can't wait to see what's in store for us <3]

I shut my eyes hard and Henry pulls up to the Royal Hawaiian Hotel. I get out and force myself up to the room.

I hear the door open and turn to see Rose walk into the hotel suite. I look at my watch, it's just past ten. "Hey, I didn't expect you to come home tonight."

She shrugs.

"How did it go?"

Instead of answering me, she hands me her phone. I look down and find the text from Ty open.

[Ty: I had a really good time tonight, can't wait to see what's in store for us <3]

I look up from the text. I swallow down a strange, sudden knot in my throat. "So it went well. Why are you so mooney?"

Again, she doesn't answer, just sits there. She doesn't even shrug this time. Again, she finds some reason to run from another boy. Again, she doesn't tell me what it is.

The knot in me changes form, it feels like lava in my throat. I was a fool to think three dates meant she'd actually be able to commit. I feel the lava spreading, threatening to come out of my eyes if it doesn't come out of my mouth. "Are you just going to keep doing this?"

"What?" Rose asks.

"Everything can be exactly what you want, but you search for some reason to run. And you don't even tell me what it is, so I can fix it."

Rose looks at me. Her face is complicated. She looks tired and confused and scared all at once. "It's not your job to fix it," she says.

"Yes it fucking is, Rosalie Anne Hart," I spit out, holding my up fist and pointing at my shackle. "You fucking bought me so I would fix your shitty ass social life."

The hurt shines brighter on her face. “My mom made me buy you.” You’d think she was the one who was owned. “I didn’t want you at all.”

The lava pushes closer to my eyes, but I’m not certain it’s not just tears. She’s just another person who doesn’t want me. This isn’t new. No reason to cry, Citlali. “That doesn’t change anything,” I tell her. “You still own me. So deal with the fact that you’re a slave owner.”

Rose looks down and grips the couch cushion. “I’m not a slave owner.”

“You *own* me, Rosalie. And the way this whole thing is going, you’ll own me forever.”

“What do you mean?”

“I only get freedom once you’re married.”

“What?” She looks genuinely surprised.

“Your mother will only free me when I get you married. So my whole life rests on my ability to get you married, but you can’t commit for some secret fucking reason that you never tell me! So then, I can’t fix it and then I can’t get my freedom.”

Rose runs her hands through her hair. She stares down at the coffee table with that same helpless look like someone just ripped the world from her hands. “Why didn’t you tell me?”

I step closer to her, laughter dripping from my lips. “I’m sorry, are you really flipping this on me?”

“We’re supposed to be friends.”

“Friends? Are we, Rose? ‘Cause last I checked friends don’t own other friends.”

“Look I tried to make things equal—”

“How? What, by letting me choose if I wanted to cook for you or not? By sleeping with me? By introducing me to your rich friends? Doesn’t change the fact that I have this on my wrist.”

“I see you as my friend.”

“Probably because you’ve just realized how sad and pathetic your life is even as a rich little princess. And you know what’s gonna happen to you, Rosie? You, you little spoiled brat, are going to die alone and I’m going to be right there stuck as your slave until I die too.”

Rose looks up with that glare that crosses over Ishita Hart’s face. “I’m not spoiled. You have no right to talk to me this way.”

I throw my hands out. “Newsflash, Rosalie Hart, since apparently you’re the only one who doesn’t know. I have no rights!” I laugh as her glare becomes deeper.

“That doesn’t mean you don’t have a choice in how you act, like right now you’re choosing to be mean.”

“Oh, you free mother fuckers love throwing that around. You think I chose to get kicked out? You think I chose to be born to a fucked up family that hates queer people? Or into a fucked up society that saw no worth in people until they had a dollar sign on them? Next, you’re gonna tell me that you chose to be born into a multibillion dollar empire and that my life would be just like yours if I’d made better choices.”

“It’s not my fault that this is the world we live in,” she says, it’s like she finally gets to spit out an awful meal she’s had to swallow for years. “What you think I wouldn’t change it if I could? Is that what you want from me? To change the world?”

“I’m not asking you to change anything. I don’t want you to do anything but get married so I can get the fuck away from you.”

She just stares at me. Breathing hard, clearly fighting back her real thoughts about me.

“God, you look just like your mother.”

“I am nothing like her.”

“I dunno, she’s a sad old sack who’s gonna die with her slave. Sounds just like you.”

Rose’s glare starts to shake and her eyes start to water.

“Is that what you want? You want me to be your obsessive annex while you play single CEO? You want me to keep track of your fucking metabolism and check up on you randomly? No. I won’t do it. I won’t be your homoerotic, wannabe stepford wife. You can end up an angry, lonely, old bitch, but I won’t be there to take care of you after you’ve chased everyone off for god knows what reason.”

Rose continues to glare, but her lips tremble.

“My god, Rosalie. Why won’t you let me leave? Why are you keeping me hostage?”

“Fine you want to leave? Then just go.”

“I can’t, Princess. You have to sell me first.” I feel my lips tremble. I swallow back the sobs that push against my throat. “So how much do you think I’m worth?”

She looks up at me with wide eyes. “City—”

“Call me what I am, Miss Hart.”

Rose doesn’t say anything. She just looks anywhere but at me. I can see a small tear travel down to her jaw.

“Call me a worthless Annex!”

She looks at me, just stares as quiet tears fall down her eyes. “I’m sorry,” she says brushing them away. “I think I left something in the car.” She rushes out of the door gripping her phone and nothing else.

She leaves me there. Standing alone in silence. I hear a chime that tells me Rose is more than ten feet away and I grab the closest pillow and scream into it. As soon as I’m done I throw it

and turn in circles in the room. I try to find something to break, but everything around me costs more than I do.

I feel like I'm in Warren's again. A place against weapons. A place designed to keep the product from being damaged. But now there's no one to fight with. No one to make me look as worthless and broken as I feel. My hands shake as I ball them into fists. I shut my eyes hard and punch my stomach. I double over and swallow my scream as I do it again. I list off all the long sleeves I packed with me in my head and punch my forearms. They start pink then red and soon the purple bruises appear.

Every fight I've ever gotten into plays in my head. Boys telling me they could cure me. Women telling me I'm crazy. My parents telling me I'm nothing. Wranglers telling me how worthless I am.

But there, in the back, is Marguerite telling me how I'm always welcome in her store. And Tommy telling me how glad she is to have met me. And Henry thanking me for keeping Rose company. And then Rose with her small, nervous smile. *I just want to make sure you're okay.*

I feel myself start to cry and run to the bathroom. I lock the door and hide in the tub. There, surrounded by walls and darkness, I let myself cry.

I stare at the night sky as I set my half empty bottle of rum next to me in the sand. I made my way to the western part of Waikiki and wandered into an ABC store before it closed. Then I wandered to the long open beach. The place where I used to watch the Friday night fireworks with Belle and my mother on our Honolulu trips. Tonight there are no fireworks, only stars. All the explosions are in my head.

I sit up on the sand and run my hand over my face then back into my hair. City. Why am I always thinking about this short annexed girl? Why is it better to run away from her than sit in her confused, disappointed stare? It seems unfair to be able to run from her when she has to stay and wait wherever I put her. Her life is a job and I am her boss.

I bring my phone to my face. At this point it's an instinct. If there is a second of boredom, look at your phone. A second of silence, look at your phone. A second of rest, look at your phone. The shiny screen that killed my ability to fall asleep until City came along stares back at me. Emails, requests, dates, times. There is something new every minute. The small rectangle in my hand feels like a shackle for the first time. My life is a job.

And yet, I unlock the phone and see the message that started this whole mess.

[Ty: I had a really good time tonight, can't wait to see what's in store for us <3]

I see the fact that it's almost four in the morning and get up to walk back to the hotel. I throw the bottle away as I make it to Kalakaua Ave and walk by the ritzy shops. None of these flashy windows can pull my thoughts away from City.

Her voice fills my head. *It went well, why are you so mopey? You, you spoiled little brat are gonna die alone and I'm gonna be right there, stuck as your slave 'til I die too!*

I shut my eyes hard. The words that had been stuck in my throat come up again and tumble out in a whisper, “Maybe that’s what I want.”

I set my phone down on my stomach. That’s not what I want. I don’t want to own City forever. I don’t want to die alone either, I just.

I’m gonna be right there, stuck as your slave

City, who sleeps so much. City who makes me breakfast. City whose past hurts, but who never cries over it. City who needs hugs at night lest another nightmare shakes her awake.

I’m gonna be right there, stuck as yours

I just want to be the one she curls into to alleviate her trembles. I want to keep waking up with her in my arms. No, I don’t want her to be my slave. I don’t want to force her to like me. But I do want her with me until I die.

The rain begins and I rush under an awning. I watch the rain fall hard onto the street. Rainy Honolulu always reminds me of childhood. There were rare days that we had to go out to events in the rain. Drops of water would always streak down the car windows as my parents reminded me how to act before stepping out to the outside world. They listed off words and lessons I already had memorised, and all I wanted to do was trace the trail of the rain drops on the window. And outside all I wanted to do was run around and feel the water drop on my skin. But all I ever did was remain perfectly still and perfectly dry with a painful smile.

Ty doesn’t feel like the rain. He’s the awning, the safe, secure dryness my mother wants for me. City feels like the rain. A force of nature that makes you smile as easily as it makes you cry.

There, alone in the rain, I slowly slip my hand out from under the awning. The water drops onto my hand, hitting hard at first then gently as the rain eases. The drops slide down my

arm. It traces me and makes me smile. I hide my phone in the inner pocket of my jacket and step out into the rain.

I turn my face up to the rain. The drops are gentle as they roll down my cheeks, down my neck and down my dress. I laugh and start walking back on the street, until I remember nothing is stopping me from running. With another laugh I take off in a sprint and run all the way to the Royal Hawaiian Hotel.

I step in to set my phone down on one of the tables and run back outside. Some of the staff stare at me as I do, but I go back to running in the rain. The rain starts to come down harder and it feels like the whole street has become a giant drum. I lift my arms up and catch drops in my palms until they become puddles. With a chuckle, I start to spin.

“What the hell are you doing?” I hear. I stop and see City at the doorway of the hotel, protected under the awning. She looks up at the rain and scoots back a bit. “You’re gonna get sick!” she shouts.

“So?” I find a puddle near the stairs and jump into it. I toss my head back and laugh.
“Come on!”

“Come on, what?”

“Come play with me,” I say before spinning again. I spin and spin, faster and faster until I’m dizzy. I almost fall, but two hands grab me tight. I chuckle while my vision continues to spin, but the rain is coming down so hard it stays blurry even after I’m steady. The rain blurred sight of City doesn’t mask the confusion on her face.

“I’ve never been in the rain,” I say softly.

“What?” City shouts.

“I’ve never been in the rain. Never without an umbrella. They never let me be anything but perfect, so I could never get wet or dirty. They never let me do this. Like run in the rain or even play. They forced me to be perfect.”

I look City in the eye for the first time since I ran out of the hotel suite. She has a look I’ve never seen, but I can’t tell if its the rain that’s causing it or me.

I shake my head and continue, “That’s why I don’t like owning you. I don’t want to force you to do anything. I know I’ll never fully understand what you’re living through, but I know some and I know how much even that small loss of freedom hurts.”

She looks around at anything but me.

“I’m sorry City. You’re right, I am being a spoiled brat. I just, I’ve been told what I’m supposed to want my whole life and now I don’t know what I actually want.”

City lets out a deep breath and looks back up the steps to the hotel door then at me then up at the rain. “Princess,” she begins. The way she says it is softer than before “You can’t get sick. We can’t get sick.”

“Just a little longer,” I beg.

City drops her shoulders and nods. She takes my hand and starts running out in the empty road. The rain and the fact that it’s four AM keeps everyone in Honolulu indoors. We run in the round about and kick water from the puddles on the ground. We laugh loudly, but still quieter than the water that surrounds and kisses us.

I run into the fountain and City follows me with a grin. She splashes me with water and I get her back like we had in the pool just yesterday. We start whooping and laughing loudly to combat the rain. The rain eases up and so we do too, laughing breathlessly as the storm quiets down.

“I bet I was a mermaid in a past life,” I say when City walks up to me, tired and out of breath.

“Maybe, but let’s get you to warmer water, Princess,” she says holding out her hand. But she slips and I catch her before she falls. She stares up at me and blushes. I glance down at her lips, but she straightens her self up a second later. She steps out of the fountain and helps me get out and back to the entrance of the Royal Hawaiian Hotel, where the staff are ready with towels, bathrobes, and friendly smiles waiting for us.

We thank them as they put the robes on over our clothes. They all seem amused with our antics, but all I focus on is how City smiles shyly at the workers. She looks precious and perfect. It’s not until she reaches for the elevator button to our floor that I notice the bruise on her arm.

“City, what happened?”

She pulls her sleeve down. “Nothing.”

She leans away from me on the opposite wall of the elevator. She has her usual scowl on, but this one is lined with something different. As she bites her bottom lip slightly, I wonder if she feels ashamed.

“Did someone hurt you?”

The elevator door opens. “Nobody hurt me,” she says as she walks off to the suite. I follow her and look at the bruise again when she unlocks the door. Inside I take my bathrobe off and set it on one of the wooden chairs. City leaves it on and doesn’t look at me. I ask again, “What happened?”

“Nothing. Now, get in the shower before you get sick.”

“City?”

“Go, before your mother kills me.”

“City, who did this?”

“Me, okay? Me. Happy? Now, get in the shower.” She turns away and hugs herself around the middle. That surge to protect her shoots through me, along with the surge of something else. Of that feeling I’ve been ignoring, and I realize I could fall in love with this girl.

I step up to her and set a hand on her shoulder

“You said you didn't want me. And I felt worthless,” she mumbles. “Like the only reason you even bought me was because you had to.”

I let out a deep breath. If ever there is a time to word something perfectly, it’s now. “That might have been why initially, I’ll admit. But now....”

City turns, making my hand slide over her back and end up on her other shoulder. “But now?”

I shut my eyes tight. “Now, I’m really uncomfortable about owning you.”

“You’re always uncomfortable about owning me.”

“Yeah, but I realized that I’m uncomfortable because of how often,” I swallow hard, “I want to kiss you.”

City is silent and I open my eyes slowly to see her staring at me.

“Now?” she asks.

I nod and feel her crash into me. Her lips are gentle as they move with mine. Her hands grip onto the front of my wet jacket and she pulls me close. I put my hands on her hips feeling her soft robe wishing it was gone. City tries to wrap her arms around my shoulders, but it stings her bruises and she pulls away. The look of pain is clear on her face when she does.

“Let me fix those,” I say walking into the bathroom and finding the hotel’s Oops Toob. I turn around and she takes the silver tube for my hands.

“I’ll fix myself. You go shower.” She turns towards the door, but I take a hold of her hand.

“Just one more,” I ask.

“No more, Princess. Now, go before you get sick.”

I nod and give City’s hand a small squeeze. I close the door behind me and lean against it. I touch my tingly lips and whisper to myself, “Wow.”

24 City

When I wake up, I have a sniffly nose. The cold rain from last night is still there to remind me that it wasn't a dream. I touch my lips remember and how Rose kissed me. I wonder for a second how long we would have kissed if I hadn't stopped her.

As if I summoned her, Rose walks into the room. "Morning," she says as she sits down on the bed.

"Morning. What time is it?"

"Almost one," she says. "So maybe not morning."

"Why are you still here? Don't you have work to do?"

"I cancelled it," Rose says, pushing her hair behind ear.

This makes me sit up. "You canceled work?"

Rose nods. "I heard you sniffing, so I thought I should stay back and take care of you."

Rose looks down and moves her hands towards mine. "And I wanted to be near you." Her pinky brushes against mine and it starts a weird tickle in my stomach.

I can't help it, so I giggle. Rose blushes and moves her hand over mine. It's warm. "Can I kiss you again?" I ask.

"Yes, but we need to talk first."

"Talk?"

Rose nods. "This," she pauses, "thing is complicated."

"Cause you own me?"

"Yes, and because we live together and because my mom wants me married to a guy.

And she doesn't know about this part of me."

“And what would you call that part of you?” I try not to let it, but a fear sinks into me that she’s straight and getting in one last experiment before she goes off and gets married.

“I don’t know yet, but I know it’s not straight.”

I nod.

“So,” she says. “I found a kind of questionnaire we could follow as a guide, ‘cause, you know, this is complicated.”

I nod again. “Okay, sounds good.”

“Okay, let’s see,” Rose says. “Do you feel able to voice concerns?”

I look down at my hands. “Not always, but I can try.”

“I will try to do all that I can to make sure you feel comfortable. Please let me know. Anything can be changed.”

I nod to cut down Rose’s rambling. “I’ll try.”

She agrees and types of few things on the questionnaire. “Okay, what do you want from this?”

I’m a bit taken aback by the straightforward nature of this question. “I don’t know. I mean, I want to kiss you.”

Rose blushes. “I do too. Should we revisit that one at a later date?”

I nod and she types a few things. “Wait,” I say, “So Ty?”

“Was not for me,” Rose says. “He was always a friend.”

I want to ask why she even asked to be set up with him, but it doesn’t matter. “Okay,” I say.

“It says in here to use ‘I statements’ when dealing with conflict. Can we agree to that?”

“I think we can.”

Rose types again. “Okay, boundaries and needs.”

“Sleeping arrangements are already a need,” I say.

Rose nods and adds it.

“You can ease up on the asking,” I add.

“Can I wait for you to initiate?” Rose asks.

I nod. “That works. Is there anything you need?”

“Just let me know if you ever need anything. It’ll just ease my anxiety.” We agree and turn to boundaries. “Anything—”

“Wait,” I say. Rose stares, all attention on me. “Can I add one thing?”

“Absolutely, yes.”

“Can I take you out on a real date, one I never planned for you to spend with anyone else?”

“Yes, absolutely,” Rose says nodding quickly and typing the new stipulation onto the document. Seeing her so adamantly for this makes me smile and sit closer to her as we go through the rest of the questionnaire. We set boundaries and make a general procedure for addressing conflicts and establish a non-verbal code to voice any other concerns.

Rose gives one final nod and exports the questionnaire as a PDF. “I’m sending you a copy for your records,” she says. I want to laugh, but I don’t, I just smile.

“So, all good,” I ask.

“All good,” she agrees. I get up from bed and take the tablet out of her hands and walk it over to a nearby table. Rose watches me as I walk back and stand right in front of her. She looks up at me, and this rare role reversal makes me smile.

I play with the ends of her hair and watch as the blush appears on her cheeks, the blush I couldn't see in the dark room where I taught her to seduce. I run my fingertips over her jawline, remembering the first time I woke up in her arms. Then I run my thumb over her lips, her warm breath tickles me as I do.

The whole time she stares at me, frozen. The ball is in my court, it will always be in my court from now on.

She tastes like mint, like the toothpaste we share. Her bottom lip fits perfectly between mine and my hands sit nicely on her shoulders. She stays perfectly still as I kiss her, only moving her lips. "You can touch me," I say, my lips brush hers as I do.

Her hand is hesitant as it moves its way up my thigh. First it's only her fingertips tracing up, but once she crosses my hip, she palms my waist over my loose t-shirt. When I bit her lip lightly, she tightens her grip, scratching my waist as she grabs my shirt.

I lick at her lips, but she doesn't get the hint. "You're not gonna break me, Princess," I tell her. At this she nods and opens her mouth to me, bringing her other hand up to the back of my neck.

My hands starts to grip her collar as her skills start to show themselves. She starts to move away from my lips, kissing my cheeks then my chin, then my chin and jawline.

"Did you learn this online too?" I ask as she starts to kiss my neck. She pulls away and looks at me with a blush on her cheeks.

"Yes, how did you know?"

I just laugh. "Just an educated guess." I give her a gentle peck on the lips. "Let's go do something before I become putty in your hands."

Rose licks her lips and nods. "That's a good plan."

I look at the time on my bracelet. It's almost one and we have yet to eat. "First things first, food."

I look up some food options and find the best choice. "Okay, it might take a bit, so how about a snack?"

After picking up a few Spam Musubis and giving Henry the day off, Rose and I drive off to the North Shore. She scarfs down her Musubi in one red light. She wipes her hand on the napkin and asks if she can put her hand on my thigh.

I've had other people put their hands on my thighs, but this feels different. It's not a claiming in any sexual way. It's not to say I'm hers, despite the fact that she legally does. It feels more like a reminder that she's there if I ever need her. That she'll take care of me, if I want. The blush on her cheek when she moves her thumb from side to side makes me think she feels similarly.

"Now, I understand why guys like doing this," she says with a smile.

She pulls up to a taco shop and we head inside. It looks different than the LA taco shops of my childhood but still nice.

"You take all the girls to get tacos?" Rose asks with a teasing grin on her face.

"The last date I had was the night I got kicked out, so no," I say.

Rose swallows hard. "Good point."

We sit in order. Fish tacos for her, Carne asada for me.

"You know Hawaiian Mexican food won't be as good as Californian Mexican food."

"No Mexican food will be as good as my Mexican food, I can promise you that. I would cook for you instead, but that's not quite an option."

Rose smiles. "I'll hold you to that."

We get our food. It's not the flavor I grew up with. But the jokes and laughs from Rose and me reminds me of my childhood. The smiles on Rose's face remind me of that sleepy smile from that first morning I woke up in her arms, and in her softness, I find it easy to be me.

Our next stop is the beach. We already have bathing suits on under our clothes. We set our stuff on the sand and lay there for a bit. Rose is concerned that getting in the water now will give us leg cramps. I'm not sure how accurate that is, but for her sake, I stay on the towel next to her.

The sun is nice and warm. It feels like a blanket, but the sea breeze keeps it from getting too hot. I want to curl up against Rose, but I don't want to fall asleep. I'm sure she wouldn't mind.

Rose's timer goes off and she sits up ready for the salty water. She pulls me up and runs to the water's edge, pulling me by the hand.

The water is warmer than I expected. In all honesty, my expectations were confused by the fact that I haven't been in the ocean in over a decade. Rose dives in and gets her hair wet. She reminds me of the silly girl in the fountain. The free, laughing girl who knew she was born for the water. I follow her into the waves and come up to the surface in front of her.

She looks down at me. "You're so small."

I roll my eyes at her. "Trust me, I know."

A wave rolls towards us and Rose picks me up quickly to get me out of the way. When it's gone, I looked down at her.

"Thanks," I say, slightly breathless.

"Anytime," she says the same way.

I try not to but I feel a yawn come up out of my throat. "God dammit," I say around it.

Rose laughs. "I got to find a way to keep you from falling asleep in my arms."

"I have an idea," I say before kissing her. I run my hands through her wet hair and pull her close. Just like in cooking irony, the salt on her lips adds to her sweetness. I'm convinced she really was a mermaid in a past life and the salt is a part of her. She's a princess and this is her domain, and here is where her kisses are best. I never imagined how good she would taste and how I'd rather kiss her than do anything else, but I pull away to look at her face. "See, energized already," I say she smirks and kisses me again.

When we left the beach last night, City's sniffles got worse. After a warm shower and reluctantly putting on a sweater, City got into bed. I wake up early, but keep the shades drawn so City can sleep in and hopefully finish off her little cold. While I watch over her, I pack our stuff for tomorrow's flight. Just as I'm finishing up, I get a call from Ty.

I get up and walk out to the lanai before I answer the phone.

"Hey Ty?"

"Hey Rose, are you okay? I haven't heard from you since the other night."

"I'm fine," I reply, moving to the edge of the lanai and looking out at the people relaxing on the beach.

"You sure? You left here pretty quickly and you still haven't answered my text."

"Right," I say, remembering suddenly that that had even happened. "Sorry, I've just been busy and it slipped my mind."

"Understood. I fly out tonight, can I see you before I do?"

I look over at City sleeping with her arms over her head. "I can't, I'm sorry."

"Oh. Well, when do you get into L.A? We could grab some food."

I scratch my forehead. If I had just been honest with myself and not asked Ty out to make City as jealous as I was at the gala, my life would be much easier right now.

"Ty, you know I love you, but as a friend. After these dates, I realized that's what we were meant to be. Just friends."

"Friends?" he asks after about ten seconds of silence.

"Yeah like old times."

Another ten seconds go by. “Understood. Rose, I have to let you go. There’s something I have to take care of.”

“Okay bye.”

“Bye.”

With that, he hangs up. I let out a long exhale and walk back into the room. On my way to get into bed next to City, I pick up my tablet and start scrolling through my email.

“Bi,” I say to myself softly, before opening up a search page and looking up Bisexuality.

City stirs next to me and I set my tablet down on the bedside table. I turn and snuggle close to her.

“Good morning, Baby,” I coo.

“Baby?” City groans.

“Would you prefer Babe?”

City lets out a choppy, sleepy laugh. “Fuck no, Princess.”

“That’s your sarcastic nickname. That doesn’t get to be your flirty nickname too.”

“Negative, Princess. Still works.”

I sigh. “Hm.” I look her over and spot the scar on her chest. She’s brave and I want to remind her of that. “How about,” I swallow before speaking the language I have the most trouble with, “Phā’īṭara chōkarī?”

“That’s not French, is it?”

I shake my head. “It’s Gujarati. It means ‘fighter girl,’ but I probably messed something up in the translation.”

“Gujarati,” City repeats. “India?”

I nod. “Yeah, Hindi isn’t the only language in India, contrary to popular belief.”

She smiles. “What was it again?”

“Phā'itara chōkarī. But for short, how about I just call you Chōkarī?”

“I like it, Princess.”

The night is warm enough to merit relaxing by the ocean. City and I start the night with cuddling and talking, but soon the usual position had City sleeping in my arms. She seems perfectly content, so I thought some more time in the moonlight would do us both some good.

I start watching the people walking around the hotel. The guest turn in early, about eight o'clock. And now the walkers are few and far between.

There are two people who keep looking around the canoes and the catamarans that are pulled up to the shore. It looks like they're looking for something. I watch them more closely as they start making signals and gestures to each other. One lifts one end of the canoe and shakes it from side to side. Out tumbles a small child. When the child starts to run, the other adult catches them. The kid kicks and screams before the man puts his hand over the kid's mouth. The other man goes and shakes the other canoes and another child, this one older, falls out.

I stare in horror, not even noticing City shift in my arms.

“They would do that in my neighborhood. Play hide and seek with the kids they couldn't afford anymore let them hide and leave.”

“People just do this?” I ask.

I feel City nod. “Gives the rest of the family a chance. Besides being annexed as a kid is always easier than as an adult.” City brushes my tears away then curls back into me to sleep.

I see the Wranglers put gags in the kids' mouths and gash them. The older one on the chest and the younger one on the outer forearm I look down at City's scar that peeks out under

her tank top. Those kids will one day be adults with those scars. And they'll get looked at the way Belle looks at City, like it's her fault she has them. Like the Wranglers weren't to blame.

But the children are Kanaka and I remember Tommy's lecture against using the word Homeless, because it's not quite accurate. "Tommy told me about this. It's different here, on the islands," I say.

City looks up at me, her eyes less sleepy than before. "What do you mean?"

"The land here, it's treated differently. For Kanaka, for Native Hawaiians, the land isn't just a place you live on. It's family."

City stares at me. There's no judgement in her eyes, she just stares attentively, waiting for me to continue.

"It sounds a bit cheesy in English. But the land is connected to them, through family lines. It's like an ancestor. Just like you should take care of your elders when they took care of you, you take care of land."

City looks up with concerned eyes. I worry she forgot things can always be worse. She sits up and looks down over the ledge. She gets up and looks over. She turns from side to side searching for them, but they're probably gone. She stops and drops her shoulders. She runs her hand over her face. I follow her and set a hand on her shoulder.

She doesn't say anything, she just hides her face in the nape of my neck and hugs me. I wrap my arms around her and rub circles on her back. The tension loosens slowly from her back and soon she's leaning heavily and I can tell she's sleepy again. I kiss the top of her head and lead her back into the room.

While she gets ready for bed, I lock up the doors and look over suitcases. They're neat and ready for tomorrow's flight. Soon we'll be back in LA. Soon we'll be back in reality. City walks out of the bathroom and pulls me to bed. She lets out a yawn as she does.

I sit down next to her as she wraps her arms around my waist. She falls asleep quickly as always. I run my hand over her hair and listen to her soft snoring. I can feel she's calm, so I slide out of bed and sit on the couch, so I can hear her if she starts to stir. I find the contact on my phone and hit call. A few moments later, a sleepy voice answers,

“Hello?”

“Hi Rita, sorry to bother you so late, I just needed to ask you something.”

“Rosie cake? Are you okay?”

“Yes, everything's fine. I just wanted to ask you about how you were freed.”

Rosalie looks a bit darker than before, a bit more refreshed, but most of all she has a smile I haven't seen in so long I can't recall when I last saw it. When she sees me, she tries to hide it, pressing her lips tightly together, but she can't

"Oh Rosie," I say pulling her into a tight embrace. "How was your trip? How is my beloved Honolulu?"

"Honolulu is lovely, just like I remembered. Unfortunately, there are new hotels as always, but it's generally the same."

"And the rest of the trip?"

"Good," Rosie says. "Lots of choices now that we've opened up to more countries. It was difficult, but I think the final list is the best lineup of getaways for the year."

"Oh, Dear, you know that's your mother's realm. Always business with you two. I was asking about your date. I'm dying to hear how young Tyler swept you off your feet."

At this Rosie blushes a bright red. "It was also good."

"Only good? That smile of yours says otherwise."

She blushes more deeply.

It makes me laugh. "That blush only confirms what I'm saying."

She bites the corner of her lip and lets out a chuckle before I kiss her on the cheek.

"I'm proud of you, Rosie. Tyler is good for you and you'll run the company marvelously."

"Thank you, Belle," she says, but something in her voice is different. Her eyes don't meet mine and she's playing with the end of her shirt. I've seen this before and I know in a second Rosalie is hiding something.

“Okay I got it,” I hear. The Martinez girl appears behind Rosie. She’s in another one of her little necktie outfits and looking at me with her blank stare of insubordination, but something else flickers over her face: a slight fear. Whatever my Rosie is hiding, this girl knows about it.

Rosalie pulls the Martinez girl by the arm. “We have things to finish before my meeting in Mother’s office. I’ll see you then?”

I smile warmly at her. “Of course, Dear.”

She huddles close to her little annex and they leave. I fold my hands in front of me and turn toward Ishita’s office. When I step in, she’s working. She has four floating screens in front of her. Without looking up, she addresses me.

“Rosalie has returned.” Though she doesn’t inflect at the end, I know it’s her way of asking.

“Yes, ma’am. She was here as scheduled.”

She nods. “Did you find the security you sought?”

The way she says it makes me smile slightly. Ever since I met her as a seventeen-year-old, I marveled at the way she spoke. With a crisp British accent, not like the Mexican accent that occasionally stabbed at my words and presented them mangled. Over the years, I’ve taken notes of her words and studied them in the secrecy of my room. There, in the dark of night, I would whisper the phrases she told me, diligently practicing her pronunciation and accent.

“Dozing off, are you, Belle?” she asks.

“I’m thinking, ma’am.”

“Do tell, won’t you?”

I purse my lips. Something about those two girls is not the way it was before. But I know Ishita, she operates on the concrete, not on my emotional speculation. I'll need to bring proof. I'll need to figure out what they're hiding before I tell her.

"The evidence is not conclusive yet," I reply. I imagine the two girls in Kim's office. "But when they are, you'll be first to know."

She doesn't think much of it, but I'm sure she'd be interested if she knew. "Rosalie will be here in twenty minutes," she says instead. "Could you make me a tea?" she asks.

"Absolutely, Mrs. Hart."

At my use of her name she looks up and I'm met with her dark eyes. Still, after twenty five years of looking at those eyes, I can't ignore how striking they are. I drop my head slightly and leave the office.

On my way to the kitchen, I pass Rosalie's office and see a similar set up, but where Mrs. Hart couldn't be bothered to look up from her work, Miss Hart seems to stare past her floating windows at the annex in the corner. When the other girl looks up, Rose looks away and a soft smile emerges along with a blush that makes her cheeks as rosy as her name. I step back a few steps and cross her office.

I bring Ishita her tea and place the handle precisely at five o'clock so that Mrs. Hart can continue working with her left hand while her right picks up the teacup. She looks down at it, then back at me.

"Is there something wrong, ma'am?"

"Not that I'm aware," she says as she picks up the cup and takes a sip while she continues to work with her left hand precisely as she dictated it.

I sit on the sofa on the side of her office. There has always been a sofa in this spot. Every few years Ishita switches it for a new one, but it's always there. Except for the first day I visited. The next time, however, there was a sofa. I look down at the couch. The first time she replaced it was because of a stain I caused.

Jacob Gordon had come to speak to Ishita and she sent me to get tea. But when I returned, he was storming off and I dropped the tray and the cups shattered.

It seems you're not as well-trained as I thought, he said with a disgusting smirk.

I fell to the floor, trying to clean up a mess I should never have made. But I only made things worse, like the idiot I was. I was always making things worse. My mother was right about that. I cut my hand on the broken porcelain and that's how Mrs. Hart, only twenty six and already so successful, found me crying on the floor.

She kneeled down beside me and hushed my apology. She inspected my cut and sat me on the couch. After finding an old fashion bandage, she wrapped my hand and promised to fix me better when we got home. *We'll make you good as new,* she had said.

Somehow, being the disaster that I was, I got blood on the couch. But the next day, there was a new couch.

A knock at the door pulls me out of my memory.

"Come in, Rosalie," Ishita says powering down her windows. Rosalie steps in and stands in front of her mother with her hands behind her back. She looks so much like the little girl I remember. Ishita looks her in the eye and continues, "I reviewed your selections and I quite agree. Good work."

Rose stands up straight and proud. She has a small, reserved smile on. "Thank you, Mother," she says.

Ishita nods firmly. “And how are things with Mr. Nishikawa?”

Rose looks away and tugs on her shirt just like she had before. She doesn't look at her mother when she speaks. “I'm not certain.”

“Look up when you speak, Rosalie,” Ishita scolds. Rose does so and bites the inside of her cheek for a moment. “The application of the rule?”

Rose drops her head then looks up quickly. “It didn't,” she admits. She brings her hands forward and starts to pull on her fingers. It reminds me of all time times she had to confess her part in one of Thomas's schemes. “Mother, I think you were right about the match. I think we're better as friends.”

Ishita looks pleased that once again she was right, but she also looks disappointed that her plan for Rose has encountered a major setback. So, I decide to speak for the first time. “What happened, dear? It seemed like things were going well.”

“I tried.” Rose steps forward slightly before moving back to her spot. “I did, but the numbers weren't right and I could feel it.”

Ishita nods again, this time softer. “The numbers never lie.” She looks me in the eyes and I look away.

I look at Rosalie instead. She keeps chewing on her lip. She keeps grabbing her wrist and letting go and grabbing the other. She keeps fidgeting. Ishita watches her, but doesn't say anything. Only studies her.

Rose finally finds the right words. “Could we ease up on the dates for a while?” she asks.

Ishita squints at her for a second and tilts her head. “You want to put a pause on acquiring the company?”

Rose lets out a nervous breath. “Not for long,” she assures. “But I feel, Mother, like I still have things to learn. I’m not sure that I’m ready yet.”

Ishita looks down at her desk and taps a pen twice. “Very well,” she says looking up at Rose. “I will call Mrs. Warren’s Center.”

“No!”

We both turn to Rose, whose fingers keep curling into fists then relaxing. She stares at her mother with wide eyes. Her mother stares back with another, longer squint. Rose straightens up and babbles for a bit before speaking coherently.

“I...I...I just mean that City has become an integral part of the house. She makes me food, so I don't survive off only protein shakes. And she makes sure I get enough sleep. And she makes sure I stay on task when I work at home. And she plays music.” Rose lets out a small laugh matched with a dreamy gaze.

I look at Ishita who is staring at her daughter with an arched eyebrow.

Rose notices and clears her throat before speaking again. “What I mean is I think she can be helpful at home. Just like Belle.”

I’m grateful for a moment that I’m sitting. How can she compare that Martinez girl to me? Did that girl raise her? Was she there for every fall and cut and scrape and night of wailing from monsters in closets or from missing her father or from disappointing her mother. No, the Martinez girl is nothing like me. There is no way this girl could replace me. And it’s not as though Rose and this girl have what her mother and I have.

I look at Ishita who glances back at me for a second before we both turn away. After a moment, I look back and see that the tips of her ears are a light red.

“Very well,” Ishita says finally. “I won’t call.”

Rose's shoulders relax and she sighs. "Thank you, Mother."

"Now, off to work. There are many things that need attending."

"Yes, Mother," Rose says with a firm nod before leaving the office. I watch as she leaves.

She keeps her hands in excited fists at her side.

Ishita taps her pen on the desk and doesn't open her work back up.

"Excuse me," I say. "I need to use the restroom."

She nods and I leave. I pass by Rose's office, stopping while I'm still hidden from her view. She's in the arms of the little Martinez girl, and I can't be certain, but it looks as though she kisses her on the temple.

I open my door and find Tommy in the middle of a yawn. She rubs her eyes before looking at me. “What the hell, Hart? Don’t you have work? Also it’s he/him today.”

I give him a little salute. “No, it’s a Sunday. And why aren’t you awake, didn’t you have plans with Rita?”

“Mother’s day is a dinner thing for us,” he says leaning on the door frame. “And what about you? Shouldn’t you be at brunch with Ishita?”

“She hates brunch. She says it’s a lazy man’s meal.” Tommy laughs. “If you can’t be bothered to wake up for breakfast, you have no business eating,” I say in my best impression of my mother.

Tommy laughs again. “What can I help you with, Kid?”

“I’m three years younger than you,” I say for the 47,000th time in my life. “Can you take City somewhere for her birthday for a few hours?”

“Why?”

“I want to make her a cake.”

Tommy arches an eyebrow at me, no doubt remembering when I helped him bake cupcakes for the Native Student Collective’s bake sale. Tommy has been really good with a fire extinguisher since then. “Rosalie.”

I hate when he uses my full name. “What?”

“Rosalie Anne, what are you hiding?”

“Nothing. Can’t I make a girl a cake on her birthday?”

“You’ve never made me a cake on my birthday.”

“That’s different.”

“I met your criteria, I’m a girl--”

“Not always.”

“Well, I sure as shit am on my birthday, so where’s my cake, Rosalie Anne?”

“Doesn’t Rita make you a cake?”

“Two-spirit, two cakes,” he says like it’s the most obvious thing in the world.

Worst is I can’t really argue with that part. “Fine,” I say, shutting my eyes in frustration.

“So will you help me?”

“What’s the difference between me and City?”

“Tommy, please.”

“I need to know before I make any decisions. Hello, informed consent, I’m a lawyer, Rose.”

I groan and look down at my shoes. “I’m kind of dating her,” I mutter. “I think I’m bi.”

Tommy doesn’t say anything, but I look up and he has this grin.

“I fucking knew it.”

“Wow, way to be a dick, Tommy. This is really hard for me.”

“Sorry. But I’m so happy for you. And I meant I knew you had a thing for City. It was obvious,” Tommy says. “She was obvious, too.”

He slips his shoes off at the doorway before stepping into my apartment and pulling me into a hug. “So Bi, huh?” he asks, still wrapped around me.

I nod. “I still find guys attractive, so yeah. I think that’s most apt.”

He nods as well. “Suits you.”

“Am I part of your queer gang, now?” I ask with a laugh.

“You always have been, but I’m happy you finally accepted our invite.”

I laugh again and hug Tommy tight. “Thanks.” He lets me go and kisses my forehead.

“Okay, so a cake for City. How can I help?”

“Just keep her distracted for a few hours. I have a recipe, so I should be okay.”

Tommy stares at my kitchen. “You sure?”

I nod. “Yeah, should be okay.”

Tommy makes a face, but still nods. He walks into my kitchen and sets the fire extinguisher close to the oven. “Okay, well just in case. Is she awake?”

“She’s in the shower.”

Once City gets out, Tommy informs her of his plan to take her to the movies and gives a small explanation of two-spirit and his pronoun shift. City nods and goes along with it. She asks me if we’ll get to spend time together and I assure her that I only have one Hart to Heart assignment to finish then I’m hers. At this point Tommy asks if he can hug her as a congratulations for freeing me from the closet. With a final kiss from me on the cheek, they head out and I get to work.

I stare down at the pan. It’s flat and dark and doesn’t look like a cake. Maybe brownies, but thin and burned. I groan at my inability to cook. I take my phone out of my pocket and call the only person who can help me. She arrives within ten minutes.

“Now, Rosie what’s the problem?” Belle says when I open the door.

I don’t say anything, just show her the pan. She looks it over with her eyebrows smushed together a bit.

“Large cookies are tricky things,” she offers.

“It was supposed to be a cake.”

“Oh.” She looks over the table. “Did you remember to add the eggs?”

I put the back of my hand on the bridge of my nose so I don’t get batter on my face. “I knew I was forgetting something.

“You were always a better sous-chef,” she says with a smile. When I was little we would make cookies together and I would be in charge of measuring things out, but Belle would combine everything and make sure we didn’t miss anything. “But this shouldn’t take long,” she says as she ties her hair back and goes to pre-heat the oven to 375.

“That’s not too low?” I ask.

She breaks into a small chuckle. “No, Dear, it’s fine.” She come back to my counter and looks over my ingredients next to my dusted tablet. She removes all the used utensils and sets them in the sink. “Okay pass me the flour. Remember to check how much you need.”

I nod and do as told. It’s just like being a child again. Belle’s gentle reminders help me make precise measurements. She’s precise like my mother but goes about it differently. She’s gentle strict. But I’ve seen the way she treats City and I know she can become Ishita if she wanted to.

When she puts the pan in the oven, she sets a timer on my tablet. “Not before this and not after. Okay, Rosie?”

I nod and let out a relieved laugh. I give her a hug. “Thank you, Belle. You’re a lifesaver.”

She hugs me back. “Anything to help you celebrate your mother, Dear.”

“Oh,” I say as I pull away. “This isn’t for Mother, actually.”

Belle tilts her head to the side. “It’s not?”

I shake my head. “You know Mother. She’s not really into Mother’s day. And, God, I would never subject myself to her scrutiny over something I made.”

She squints slightly. “Then who, if not your mother, is the cake for?”

I rub the back of my neck. City and I said we wouldn’t mention our relationship, but friends can make cakes for each other can’t they? “It’s for City’s birthday.”

Her eyes flicker that intensity that reminds me she’s been learning from my mother for years. That flicker I’ve never faced myself. “How old is la Citlali today?” It’s odd to hear her use the Spanish pronunciation of City’s name.

“She’s twenty-six. Tommy took her to the movies and we’re gonna probably get dinner,” I tell her just to fill space.

Belle doesn’t say anything.

“She hasn’t celebrated her birthday since she was seventeen. I just thought it would help her feel like she was really a part of my family,” I say. “That’s all.”

Belle glances at my room and the living room. I hope we didn’t leave anything incriminating in sight. She nods slowly and puts her hands on my arms. “Then you all have a lovely evening,” she says. “Be sure to call your mother at least.”

“Yes, Belle.”

She runs a hand over my cheek and turns to leave. “Goodbye, Dear,” she calls as she closes the door.

I let out a deep breath and wash my hands. I slip on my computing gloves while the cake bakes. I look for a restaurant City would want. I don’t know how City did this for me all this time, because in this sea of options, nothing feels good enough for her. I search and scroll until

the timer goes off on the tablet. I remove an actually edible cake from the oven and set it on the stove. I make sure to turn off the heat and use oven mitts to flip it onto a long plate.

The problem comes with the frosting. City walks in as I try for the fifth time to decorate the cake.

“Oh, Princess, what are you doing?” she says with a little lopsided smile. She sets a small shopping bag on the bench and walks over to me.

I look down at the illegible cake with suddenly clear frostine. “It won’t stay.”

City smiles at me the way I’m sure means *at least you tried*. “You have to let it cool down first,” she says.

I drop my head back. “The kitchen hates me.”

“The cake looks good,” she says hugging me from behind. “Nice and fluffy.”

“You should see the first attempt.”

“Is that why Tommy had us sneak into another movie?”

“I guess that’s what counts as stalling for him.”

“You know, for a lawyer, he’s a bit of a delinquent.”

I laugh. “Enough about Tommy.” I turn around and plant a kiss on City’s lips. Quick and simple. “Happy Birthday, Chōkarī! Where do you wanna go get dinner?”

She arches an eyebrow at me. “You don’t already have a full itinerary?”

“I wanted to, but nothing felt right,” I admit. “So I thought I’d just go to the source you know.”

City laughs. “Well if you ask me, I just want to stay in.”

“Stay in?”

City nods. “Just stay in, cook for my girl, and watch a movie. Sounds perfect.”

I can't help but blush and push a strand of hair behind my ear. It's not until City walks to the pantry that I register what she said in its entirety. "Wait, you can't cook on your birthday."

"Been doing it for years," she says as she scans our groceries.

"Well, not this year. We can order take out. Whatever you want, just don't work today."

City lets out a sigh and closes the pantry. "Let's get some tacos," she says.

Hours later, City is laying on the couch, using my lap as a pillow. The movie is over, the food eaten and we're talking, while I play with her hair. She gives me an extensive summary of the movie she and Tommy went to go see.

"The guy's first problem was trusting the loan shark to begin with," she says. Her expressions as she retells this story make me smile and I imagine her reading books out loud and telling stories. She makes voices for every character and mimes out the actions with her hands. She gets so into it, and for once, she looks at ease.

I imagine us doing this every day. Sitting together, telling each other stories playing with each other's hair. I imagine her with this easy smile every day. She could live a life without worries and we could work together. We could look out for each other.

As she talks, she looks up at me and takes a hold of my free hand and starts to play with my fingers. She does this while she gives her commentary. "The ending was too easy. It's like all of the world's problems can be solved by one screenwriter." She shrugs and looks up. Then she blushes. "Everything okay, Princess?"

I nod. "Everything is perfect."

“I don’t want to go,” Rose groans yet again in front of the mirror.

“It’s one meeting, Princess. Remember when you use to live for this stuff?”

“That was before you,” Rose says, hugging me around the waist and kissing my shoulder.

I brush my teeth, still aware of her face pressed to my neck. “Don’t get me wrong, I still love my job, I just... wish it could wait a day or two.”

I turn and kiss Rose on the cheek. “Well, it’s only a couple of hours then you come home and I’ll have lunch ready and we can do whatever you want.”

“Whatever I want?” Rose asks, I can hear the smirk on her face. “I’m much more interested in what you want to do?”

“I have to decide now?”

“No, but it’ll get me through work. We can go to the movies or the beach or we could go to Disneyland.”

I laugh and spin in her arms so I can face her. “I’ll think about it and let you know when you come back, okay?”

She pouts but nods. “Okay.” She leans her forehead on mine. “I’ll text you when I’m on my way.”

“Okay.”

“Okay.”

Her forehead is still pressed to mine. “Go, Rose. I’ll be here when you come back.” She nods again and kisses me softly before turning to leave.

“See you soon,” she calls from the door.

“Bye.”

I go back to bed, not to sleep, just to smell her. She smells soft like laundry detergent. I could happily drown in that smell. I hug her pillow tight to my face.

The doorbell rings and I'm sure Rose forgot something.

"What did you forget, Princess?" I ask as I pull the door open. It's not Rose, it's Ishita and Belle.

"Do you often refer to my daughter as royalty?" Ishita asks with an arched eyebrow.

I don't answer. I stare at them as they push past me and step inside.

"Close the door, Citlali."

I stare forward as I close the door. I knew it would happen, but I hoped it wouldn't be so soon. I have to do something to sound normal. "Mrs. Hart—"

"You will answer the following questions quickly and honestly," she states. "Are you in a relationship with my daughter?"

"She owns me."

"Have you been intimate with my daughter?"

"What do you mean by intimate?"

"Have you kissed my daughter? And don't try to give me one of those half answers."

I look down at the floor around me. Was that stain always there?

"Quick and honest."

I shut my eyes and hope I'm not making a huge mistake. "Yes, okay? Yes."

"Was this in Honolulu?"

I swallow hard. "Yes."

"Are you the reason why Rosalie wanted to stop the dates with Mr. Nishikawa?"

"I don't know."

“Make an educated guess, Citlali.”

“Maybe.”

“So you’ve failed in your assignment.”

“No.”

Ishita arches an eyebrow at me.

“Let me marry her. You need her married and I love her, let me fix this.”

At this she laughs. “You want me to allow you to marry my daughter. That’s just absurd.”

“Why? Because I’m a girl?”

“Among other reasons, but yes. How do you expect straight women to believe Rosalie knows what men want when she’s a lesbian?”

“She’s not a lesbian. She’s bi.”

She sighs and does something on her phone. “Which I can tell you gives even less credibility. So no, you can’t fix this.” She looks over at the door. “Take her away, please.”

I turn back and find two Wranglers walking into the apartment. They don’t take off their shoes at the door.

“No, please, Mrs. Hart. Please give me a chance.”

“Is there a way to silence her?”

One of the Wranglers wraps an elastic band over my mouth and tears it off. The end seals itself to the rest of it. I’ve seen other angry looking teens come into Warren’s with this before. I never expected it to feel so soft. It’s almost a comfort. He puts the left-over roll back in his pocket and goes to take my bracelet off. It feels weird to want it back on as soon as it’s off. He puts it into his pocket.

“Leave it,” Ishita says. “We’ll need another one anyway.”

The Wrangler shrugs and sets the bracelet down on the bench by the door. He puts my wrists together and binds them in a thick set of cuffs. They flash green when they're a locked. It seems weird to me that green now means trapped.

The other Wrangler gets the honor of adding a double-wrangled scar on my neck. I don't cry when he does cuz that's what they want. That's what all these slave-catchers want. I feel the blood trickle down my neck until he tapes a piece of gauze over it.

I look over at the apartment one last time. Our kitchen. Our living room. I can't see our room from where I am, which almost makes me cry. When they take me out, I try to spot it, but I can't.

They take me down the elevator and when we emerge none of the staff look me in the eye. I'm back to being beneath them. They stick me in a van with others. Some are knocked out. Some are talking to themselves. Two are kids, about fourteen, and I know by the end of the day, they'll be in green t-shirts at Warren's. We all have gauze in common. The men on their arms. The women on their chests. And I'm the only one with it on my neck.

I spend the day in that van. At the end, we drop off now seven kids at Warren's. Two greens, two yellows and one orange who looks at me before she gets out.

I nod at her, wishing I could tell her something, but my mouth is covered.

She nods and blushes before getting pulled out of the van.

After that, it's two more hours in the van and we end up in the boonies at one of the big facilities. I look up at the sign of the building where I'm probably going to die. Annexed Center of Eastern Los Angeles. Seems fitting.

They line us up by age and take us inside. I watch as people get put in chairs. Some of them fight while they get restrained, but soon they have their arms and legs strapped in and moving is harder. Then they get small white circles stuck on their temples. The circles blink a small red light. After that, they put big goggles over their eyes. After that, they stop and their heads drop back into the back of the chair. They all get lined up in these chairs, all unconscious. But soon the little circles on the heads of those at the front start blinking more quickly until the light stays red or green.

When they drop me down in a chair, I can't decide if it's worth it to fight or not, and the indecision keeps me still. They rip the green gag off me, attach the white circles to my temples and put the large goggles over my eyes. All different hands, I feel like a thing in a factory. The circles are cold and the goggles are heavy. A few moments into wearing the goggles, the things in front of me start to change. The colors start to blur and bleed. They fade and I'm left staring at blank whiteness.

A drop of red falls in the middle and starts to spread over the whiteness. I notice the edges are pink. It reminds me of the dream of dancing with pink. There's a chime that goes off overhead. Maybe overhead—at this point I'm not sure. The red changes into orange and slowly the walls move through the rainbow. Occasionally there are chimes. After purple, the colors restart, this time darker. More chimes. Another rainbow, lighter. More chimes.

The chimes stop and are replaced with a whisper. "City." I can't place the voice. The next time is in a different voice. And again and again, always a different voice. The voices seem familiar, but I can't figure out why or where I remember them from. The voices start to be stark and defined. My younger brother's voice, my youngest brother's voice. Marguerite's voice. Tommy's voice. Ishita's voice. Maribelle's voice. Rose's voice. My dad's voice. Then my

mom's. It locks onto her voice and repeats my name as the scene fades to a muted picture of a living room.

"Citlali," My mother yells as she materializes in front of me. "Estavas aya con una cualquiera!"

"She's not a cualquiera," I hear my younger self yell.

"Todas las lesbianas son unas cualquiera," my dad yells this time. His denim shirt is the brightest part of the memory. I remember staring at it as they yelled. Staring at my own last name embroidered on the chest.

"Then I guess I'm a cualquiera," I hear my younger self yell. I relive my father running up to me and grabbing my arm. Even in this strange form it hurts and I remember the bruise it had made. He yanks the door open and pushes me out. Again, he says nothing, just like he had in real life.

When my mother shuts the door, I only see black all around me. There is a soft chime at the end and then nothing. Nothing for hours, it feels. My thoughts feel like static and I try hard to think about anything to pass the time.

Then I hear my name softly. It sounds like a whisper. It plays again, still soft, but in another voice. And again in a new voice. It repeats, slowly getting louder, sifting through all the voices that have ever spoken my name.

"City. City. City."

The syllables bump into each other and it distorts my name into just sounds. My name becomes a bomb on my eardrums and I never want to hear it again. As the names slow down they morph into two voices.

"City?"

I recognize my little brother, Gabriel, materializing in front of me. He's small with short brown hair, like her never stopped being eleven. He has the same worried look over his face that he always did. "What were you doing?"

"Nothing, Gabe," I hear my younger self say.

"Someone at school said you were gay."

My younger self says nothing

"You wouldn't do that, right?"

I look at him more closely. "That's not what you said," I say out loud. "You told me it was okay."

Gabriel shakes his head. "I lied."

His voice is off at the beginning. It sounds like it might be mechanical, but then it fixes itself into the exact voice I remember. "Gabe, no. No es cierto."

"Si, si lo es." The stupid machine speaks Spanish, but it speaks that proper Spanish. The Spanish we never learned. Even this stupid machine is better at being what my parents wanted than I am. But Gabe would've said "Si es" or "es la verdad," so at least I know this one is not real. "That's not normal," the voice says switching back to English. "That's why you had to leave."

"You would never think that."

"No," another voice says. "But I would." My other brother Angel appears. He's only two years older than Gabriel but so much taller. He still has that haircut I did for him. He's in the T-shirt I stole for his birthday. I raised him. I raise them both when Mom and Dad were working.

"No you wouldn't, Angel."

"I knew about you and that girl and I didn't like it. I hate people like you."

The machine brings back the words I heard him say with no thought to how it might hurt someone. Words he yelled at Gabe when he played with his toys. Words my father used on my uncles. Words that would play in my head whenever I kissed a girl.

“How do you think Mom and Dad found out about your date? How did they know where to find you?”

I shut my eyes. The straps on my wrists and ankles heat up and burn me. I open my eyes to stop the burn, and Angel is right in my face and I shoot back in my seat. I feel him touch me like a ghost is grabbing my chin.

“You know you’ve thought it. You left me alone and only cared about Gabe. You abandoned me, so I told Mom and Dad and got rid of you.”

I want him to let go of me, but I can't move. I can't shake his hand away away or push him. He just stays there with his angry grin. Slowly, his face changes and it becomes Gabriel.

“We’re better off without you,” he says.

The face disappears and they rematerialize so I can see them standing. They change a little, growing up a year in a few seconds.

“We’re better off without you,” Angel says.

They keep growing, the eight years I’ve been gone playing out before me in 20 seconds.

“We’re better off without you,” they say together.

I hear a little chime and feel a little zap and I black out.

I send City a text while I ride in the back of the car. I check the time, it's only twelve so we still have plenty of time to go have fun in the city before we have to sleep and get ready to pretend for another day that we're not into each other.

I lean against the window. I wonder how long it'll be until we don't have to hide. When we can hold hands at work and I can kiss her on the cheek. But there's my mother and the fact that City is not free and it seems like our life of secrecy is going to last a while.

I get out of the car and head up to the suite. I check my phone, but City hasn't texted me back. I step inside and slip off my shoes. "City, I'm home," I call. "Did you decide where you want to go?"

She doesn't answer so I walk towards the room.

"Are you in bed, sleepy head?"

My smile falls as I find my mother and Belle in my room instead of City. My mother's face is unreadable as always and for the first time, so is Belle's. Something about this unsettles me. They come forward, backing me out of the room.

"City, can you come here please?" I call out.

I'm met with silence and a small breath coming out of my mother's mouth.

I try again. "City?"

"She's not here."

"What do you mean she's not here?" I can hear my voice wavering. I wish I could hold City's hand right now, so I grab the end of my blouse. It's not the same. "Where is she?"

"She's been returned."

"Returned? What do you mean returned?"

“Ms. Martinez understood the stipulations of our agreement.”

“I don’t understand.”

My mother's phone rings, but she answers me instead. “Her failure to fulfill said agreement is no one’s fault but her own. And by consequence, she’s been returned to where she came from,” she says before answering the call. It sounds like Hart to Heart business.

City can’t go back to where she came from. She’s twenty-six, Warren’s doesn’t take them after twenty-five. She can’t be back there. No.

I can’t read my mother, so I look at Belle instead. I expect her large eyes to reflect some pity or the warmth I’m used to, but there is only a hardness in her gaze. My mother finishes her phone call and puts her phone away in her purse. She turns to Belle, casually resting her hand on her shoulder. “I have to get back to the office. Ask Henry to take you home, Belle.”

“Yes, Mrs. Hart.”

She turns to me with the same blank expression as always. She reaches out and presses her hand to my cheek in a odd gesture of sympathy that doesn’t match her emotionless features. “It will be fine, Rosalie,” she says, “We’ll try again soon.”

I stare as she walks past me. “Wait, Mother, you’re joking, right? You’ve suddenly developed a twisted sense of humor and this is all a joke, right?”

“Rosalie, I would never waste time on a joke. Nor should you,” she says before closing my door. I look down and see City’s shoes are gone. And her jacket is gone. And her bracelet is sitting on the small bench we never use to put on or take off our shoes. I feel my throat tighten. “City?” I call out again as I walk back to our room.

“Rosie, dear,” Belle says, holding my arm.

“Belle, she didn’t really do it, right?”

“She had to.”

I shake my head. “No. City’s not gone.” I pull away from her and search all of the rooms. They’re all empty, even the closet has been emptied of all of her things. I rush to the drawer I left her and find her book secure and my birthday present to her and her little charm. I grab the charm and walk back to the living room. I can already feel tears pushing to come out. I rush to Belle. “Please Belle, you have to talk to her,” I say. It’s hard to keep my voice from shaking. “You have to convince her to bring City back.” I grip Belle’s hands, pleading, “Please.”

Belle shakes her head, her eyes softening as she tries to pull me closer. “Rosalie, my poor little heart.” She tugs at my hands again and I let myself fall into her, feeling her arms wrap tightly around me. “It will be okay. I promise.” She rocks me in her arms like she used to when my mother and I had a fight. “Everything will work out in the end.”

“You’ll talk to her?”

“I can’t do that, Rosie.”

I pull away and she grabs a hold of my hands. “Yes, you can. You can.” I free one finger from her grasp and point at her. “You can stop this. Please Belle stop this. She’ll listen to you. She always listens to you.”

She runs a hand over my cheek. “This is how it must be.”

I feel my heart sink and pull away from her. “What?”

“She had to go back to where she belonged.”

I take a step back. “She belongs here with me.”

Belle reaches for my cheek again, but I move my face away. But she steps forward and sits her hand on my cheek. “No she doesn’t, my little heart.”

“Yes, she does. I love her.”

At this Belle finally lets go of me and lets out a laugh. It's sarcastic and it slaps me the way it never has before. "No," she says. "No, I won't have you falling for some annex girl."

"What?"

Belle makes a face like she never thought she'd have to explain this to me. "Rosalie, she's beneath you? Why would you ever lower yourself? And for that annex?"

"Lower myself? She's not subhuman--"

"Of course she is. She an annex."

"So are you."

Belle scoffs. "That scar is on her chest, not mine. We are nothing alike."

I shake my head at her. "You were both annexed. And it wasn't your choice."

"Yes it was. I chose to be a stupid girl and it got me kicked out. And she chose to run away instead of reporting herself like she should have."

"City didn't run away. She got kicked out. There's nothing different."

She starts to shake her head quickly. "It is, it's different."

"It's not. Even down to your work. You both cook and take care of us. You serve my mom just how City served me, how is that different?" After I say it it dawns on me. "You serve her like...."

"I'm a good servant."

I look at her. She's always been lighter than us. The blush has always been easy to spot on her face. "Are you in love with my mother?"

She stiffens for a second then the old Belle I've always known is back. "Dear, you're worked up and stressed out. Go on and take a nap. We'll talk about this tomorrow." With that she leaves and closes the door and I'm left alone with the sound of my breathing.

City is gone.

Once you turn twenty-six I can't take you anymore.

City is gone.

You either fail their test and get sent to Retirement

I reach for my phone and speed through my contacts.

or, by some barely miracle, you pass

“What’s up, Kid?”

and get brainwashed into ultimate submission

“Tommy,” I say, my voice breaking as I start to cry. “I need your help.”

Every part of me is heavy. My head is dropped lazily onto my chest and my knees sting. I wonder how I fell asleep while sitting. I finally blink my eyes and see white sweats on my leg. I see the straps are on my wrist. I remember now: they brought me to hell.

The room is different than the one they had me in before, but the chair seems the same. This room has small windows at the top. There's only enough light to see the dust fall around me.

In the silence, I hear crying. I turn and see a black man in a seat just like mine. He wasn't there before when they first brought me in. Then again, I don't remember ever being brought to this room. He has the same big goggles over his eyes. He's mumbling something and squirming.

"Hey," I say softly. He doesn't hear me, so I try again. "Hey."

He turns to look at me. "Who are you? Do you know where we are?"

"I'm City. We're in an Annexed Holding Center."

"Annexed? But I'm not supposed to be annexed, I'm housed!"

"Housed, what do you mean housed?"

"I was walking in the park and these Wranglers came and they asked for my housing papers, but I don't carry those with me, so they grabbed me and put me in a van."

I looked down at his arm and see the fresh wound of a wrangled scar.

"I kept explaining, but they wouldn't listen and they sedated me. All I remember is these dreams about my mom and dad but they didn't feel right. None of it felt right."

I swallow hard. "I think that's the brainwashing. It's the servitude therapy."

At this he starts to wiggle and fight in his chair. I noticed the lights change colors on his chair. The red flickers to green and I'm not sure I'll ever see that color the same way again.

“Stop or else it’s going to know you’re awake.”

He keeps moving and struggling. “I don’t want to hate my memories. I don’t want to hate my memories.”

His struggling makes the machine start up. The wiring I already know to fear plays and the darkness of the goggle sets in. I can’t hear him anymore and the room is gone. Instead, I hear that fucking chime again, before the cacophony of my wretched name. It starts again with colors like the last time. My name starts to change and soon it’s not my name at all.

“Aria.”

“Samantha.”

“Grace.”

I take a deep breath. Every name comes with a new voice, all women. All the women who housed me. All their voices echo.

“I’ve never done anything like this before.”

“The sex or the pick-up?” my younger self says.

The scene before me is still playing colors, like it can’t match the voices to the place. It has too much data. Too many variables.

“I’ve been with women,” they say all blended again.

“A few times.”

“Twice.”

“Once.” They only ever answered this way.

“Once.” But the voice changes and my heart tightens. An oversized hoodie materializes before me and then there’s Sasha in front of me with her cocky little grin.

“You’re such a little liar,” my younger self says.

“I’m not!” she insists. “We totally did it.”

“If you say so, kiddo,” my younger self says. Then the first bullet shoots through the room. My younger self pulls Sasha to the ground and yells for everyone to get down against the storm of bullets. They shoot in all directions.

“My book,” Sasha says, before crawling towards the table where it’s sitting.

“No, Sasha.” I don’t feel it, but I remember that was when I got shot. Sasha stands up to get her book but gets hit twice. She falls down.

Everything plays out how I remember.

“City,” she says reaching out for me. “City, you still have to teach me Spanish,” she says holding her book close to her chest. I shut my eyes. I can’t do this again.

“City.” It’s Sasha’s voice again, but this time it’s not right. I open my eyes and see her standing in the dark. The basement is gone.

“You’re not real,” I say.

“City, you promised to teach me Spanish.” She’s staring at me with her dark eyes. She has the same thick braid and thick eyebrows. Her same baggy jeans and her dirty sneakers. She’s just how I remember her.

“I’m sorry, Sasha.”

“Why did you even stay with us? We were hidden for months before you came along.”

I watch as the others materialize around her. All with slightly oversized clothing. All various shades of brown. And all of them frowning.

“We didn’t even last a month after you showed up.”

I stare at all the faces of the kids who died in that room that night. But not me. Somehow, I made it.

“It was probably one of your creepy women who reported us. They wanted you back.”

I shake my head. It wasn't my fault. It was an accident.

“You thought it because it's true,” Sasha says. “You ruined everything.”

The blood starts to soak through their clothes in all the places where they were shot. I shut my eyes, but the burn opens them again. I'm back to watching Sasha reach out for me.

“City,” she says, “you killed me.”

I hear the faint chime and a zap knocks me out.

“Rose, I need you to relax, okay,” Tommy says, rubbing my arms. We’re in her office and have been here since she picked me up from my house after the whole ordeal with Belle. We’ve been trying to get City back, but so much of Annexation information is legally allowed to be undisclosed that it’s hard to figure anything out. Safe to say, it’s been weighing on me. “I promise, we will get City back, but these things take time.”

“Mx. Thomas,” someone calls. Tommy walks over to the woman in front of a computer screen. “So Mrs. Hart used her account linkage to Ms. Hart’s bank to return Ms. Martinez, but the linkage between the accounts is minimal to the point that there is not enough there for her to make decisions.”

“Sounds about right. Did she actually return her? There’s been no change to Rose’s account.”

“No, it seems that Mrs. Hart marked Ms. Martinez as Street Identified and presumably had the Wranglers come in to take her as a double-wrangled annexed person.”

“Probably trying to push for Retirement rather than Therapy. That’s kinda fucked.”

I try to keep calm. I’ve seen City’s records and they’re not great, but she has two strikes not three so there’s a chance she’ll be okay. There has to be.

“Any news on her location?” Tommy asks.

“None yet.”

The door bursts open a second later. A white man almost falls forward onto the secretary’s desk. “Please you have to help me. They have my husband.”

I study him closer, but it isn’t until I look at his glasses that I remember who he is. “Mr. Scott?”

He's too busy explaining what happened to hear me. "His name is Sammy, Samuel Scott. He hadn't been answering me since before lunch today, but the cops say they can't do anything for twenty-four hours. But an hour ago, his osteo chip sent me a notification that he's in the Annexed Center of Eastern Los Angeles. I think he was taken there."

Tommy walks over to him and I follow. "They took him."

"I think so, he doesn't have a car and that facility is really hard to get to. But, it doesn't make any sense. He's housed," he says.

"Don't worry, Sir, we'll get him back. You said he went missing today?"

Mr. Scott nods. Tommy turns to the worker from before. "Get me two release orders drafted with all the proper information. I'll double check them and send them to the courts." Then she turns to me. "The Wranglers only go to one facility a day, but aren't required to say to which one. But now we know where they went, so now we know where City is." Tommy sets a hand on my shoulder. "She'll be back soon," she says before going back to work.

One of Tommy's coworkers brings me into an office to fill out the information on the release orders. She makes copies of City's files. She hands them back and has me go sit outside. Mr. Scott is brought into the room next.

I stare at City's files. I open them to her pictures. I stare at her last picture at Warren's, in her grey t-shirt. Her unsmiling face. I run my hand over her cheek, wishing I could do it for real. I look over her pictures over and over again until Mr. Scott sits down next to me.

"You bought City, right?" He asks.

I nod. "You're Mr. Scott?"

"Quentin." He looks around. "All things considered."

"Rosalie."

He nods. "Did they take her too?"

I shake my head. "Mom didn't think she was a good fit."

He nods, but soon starts to shake his head. "I never thought they'd take him away. It's all worse than I thought. Was I at least right about you? Did you take care of her?"

I look at her picture again and run my thumb over her chin. "I hope so."

He nods and stands up. "I'm gonna get some tea, do you want some?"

I shake my head and he walks off. I play with City's charm in my pocket as I lean back on the uncomfortable chair.

I wake up to the sound of crying every morning. At least I think it's morning every time. It's really hard to tell in here. It's the same guy from before. After a few sessions, I found out his name is Sammy. Mostly her cries about how this was never supposed to happen and that this is illegal. And I listen. It's the only break I get from my own memories. They like to re play Sasha and Gabe. I'll listen to Sammy go on about injustice over that any day. But today he's talking about something else.

"Quentin," he mumbles over and over.

"Who's Quentin?" I ask.

"My husband," he says between sobs. "He makes me feel better. I don't like this. I don't want to be here."

"Me neither. I wish my girlfriend was here," I say. Rose. I remember her laugh and smile and the way she would run her thumb over my cheek and her soft kisses.

Sammy sobs again. "I want him," he calls out.

I want Rose. I want to be home. I want to be in her arms. The tears come fast, and I hope they might flood the goggles and break them, but they fall to the side out of a gap. "I want her," I say as the sobbing starts. The only sounds are us crying.

But the machine whirring begins and the sobs aren't of sadness anymore.

My tears fall down my cheeks down to my neck where they get absorbed by my shirt and remind me of the rain the night Rosalie first kissed me and the ocean water dripping from her hair in North Shore and being in her arms kissing her.

I'm never going to see her again.

The machine starts whirring and this time it doesn't matter because the worst has already passed and Rosalie is gone. There are some chimes, my name. I'm already over it. But this time, the only color that comes from the darkness is pink. It's a pink I recognize quickly as the color of Rose's dress. The color becomes the dress and then there she is in that same pink dress from the gala, looking beautiful as ever.

"Rose?" I ask softly. No, she's not real. I have to remember she's not real.

"I am real, baby," her metallic voice chimes. No. Rose doesn't call me baby. I don't say anything. I just watch her.

"It's my fault, isn't it?" she says.

I still say nothing as she plays with her fingers and looks away. I hate myself for giving this machine so much information about her.

"It's my fault you're here."

I can't help it and I shake my head.

"Well, didn't I buy you?" She sits down as a bed manifest behind her. It's our bed, the bed from home. "Even when I didn't want you."

None of me says anything. Not the me of the past and not the me of right now.

"But you wanted me didn't you?"

Her dress falls away and she's left in pink lingerie. The edges of her body have a thin silver outline. She's not real. She's not real.

She stands up and walks towards me. I feel her put her hand on my cheek the same gentle way she always would. She kisses me gently as always.

"Needy pathetic thing," says a voice that takes me a second place. Belle.

I hate it but I do need Rose. I want her kisses so bad, even if I have to settle for these fake silver-lined excuses. I close my eyes and kiss Rose back but her kisses turn rough. When I open my eyes it's not Rose, but a face I prayed to forget. I push myself back in the chair.

He's blond with scary blue eyes and a grin that says he's not really like the rest of us and he wasn't. He was a high school volunteer at Warren's. He was a reason I'd never trust those navy blue polos.

"You certainly are pretty," he says just as he had that day.

"Fuck off," my younger self says.

The grin of his morphs into rage and freezes.

Belle's voice. And it's false metallic edge, whisper into my ear, "Look what you've got yourself into. If only you would shut your mouth and take the compliment."

I feel another teardrop to my cheek before he unfreezes and yanks me by the arm. It's the same dizzying feeling from before that washes over me until I feel the familiar crash into the back of the supply closet. I don't remember eating in the last day, but if I did I'd be throwing up right now. He grabs me again and I shut my eyes, bearing the burns on my wrists as long as I can. I scream and my eyes shoot open and I see the familiar blue polo. When I look up, the gross blonde boy is staring down at me saying, "You're some kind of dyke aren't you?"

"Stop," I hear myself whisper.

He grins like the creep he is. Just like my father's denim shirt, his navy blue polo and his Warren volunteer name tag are the most defined. Connor Madsen. It's all I stared at when it first happened. His stupid name on a stupid metal volunteer name tag as stupid moans rang in the closet and his stupid sweaty hand covered my mouth.

“What were you even going to do with that information?” Belle’s voice laughs. “The only people who volunteer instead of work are rich. You think you’re worth more than a rich white boy?”

I get pushed by his hand to look up like I had before. He looks into my eyes. He’s about to speak when suddenly everything goes dark. Then I feel the goggles getting pulled off my face. I shut my eyes, but my wrists don’t burn.

“City?”

I slowly open my eyes and see Rose.

“No,” I say. “Not again. Not another trick.” I push back against my seat.

“It’s me. I’m real, Chōkarī.” she says there’s no metallic edge to her voice. She’s not outlined in silver.

“Rose?”

She nods. “I promise. We’re getting you out of here.”

The first night, I couldn't sleep. I rolled around in bed for four hours, but nothing. I got up, packed a bag, took the car keys from Henry's office, left him a note, and drove to Tommy's apartment. I've been on her couch ever since.

Tommy makes me hot chocolate in the mornings before she goes to work. She sets it down on the coffee table and runs a hand over my hair. When she comes back, it's always with a sigh and a comment about how bureaucracy and e-governments should be better about this by now, but they still aren't.

I spend my days listening to City's old playlists. She listened to old music. Ancient even. Songs dating back to the 1940s and 1920s. Some songs from the turn of the millenium. And sprinkled in are some songs from ten years ago.

But then there are the Spanish songs whose date I can't place. She listened to this one woman a lot. The woman sounds drunk when she sings. Drunk and angry and heartbroken. I can understand her pain.

I don't leave the couch until Tommy calls me one day, a week after City was taken, at two in the afternoon.

"We got the files. Quentin will be here in ten then we'll pick you up, okay?"

I change into some clean clothes and throw City's hoodie on over everything. I sit on the bench by the door with my sneakers on and wait for Tommy to tell me they're here. I play with City's charm. Tommy sends me a text and I get up. I slip her charm into my jean pocket and look down. Her bracelet is sitting on the bench. I glare at it slightly and leave the apartment.

We drive to the place in the outskirts of the city. Or at least the part that people call the city and not the underdeveloped parts of Los Angeles. Tommy tells us to stay behind her and to

let her do her talking. I nod, but every part of me is screaming for City. It's hard to keep my mouth from doing the same. She tells us to take a deep breath. "We'll get them soon, I promise."

We walk in and something in me sinks. The feel of this place is nothing like Quentin's family business. It's colder and there's security. Two of the men of the front desk have greasy shirts and stare aimlessly at their screens. They chuckle every few seconds and every time I'm more unnerved.

"You looking to buy or sell?" one asks, never moving his blank stare off of his computer screen.

"Neither," Tommy says. "I have a court order for the release of Citlali Martinez, age twenty-six and Samuel Cranston, age twenty-nine."

"We ain't got 'em," the second one answers, also maintaining eye contact with a screen.

"We have the paperwork that says there were brought here," Tommy says. She's annoyed, I can tell even through the calm disposition she's taken on.

"We can check but it'll take a few days," the first one said finally looking up with his blank blue eyes. "These annexed really worth the trouble?"

My hands ball into fists as I fight the words climbing up my throat.

"We have legal permission to enter and search your premises, if we must," Tommy warns.

The two men don't respond; for them the matter had already been settled. Tommy rolls her eyes and walks up to the double doors that lead to what I assume are holding cells.

Two security guards step in front of her. "You're not authorized for that area," one says.

Tommy holds up her document, which one guard takes and tries to rip to pieces but cannot. "Printed on unbreakable paper. What kind of an idiot do you take me for?" Tommy takes

back the paper and slips it into her suitcase then motions for us to follow her and we passed through the elevator.

It's even colder than the lobby. There is a long hallway with doors on each side and an elevator at the very end. We walk to it and search the directory. It's just numbers next to other numbers.

"They're ages," Quentin says. "Most facilities are broken up that way. We need to get to the top floor. Youngest at the top, since they're the least common. And the elevator ride builds anticipation for buyers."

I want to throw up.

Tommy pushes the button and we get in. The elevator has mirrors inside. A strange thing to put in a place where they keep slaves. Our reflections stare back at us. We're exhausted, but I'm sure some people like to see themselves as some benevolent saviour to those they annex or some powerful god finally getting the servant they deserve. We get off at the top floor and it just looks like a big warehouse with a bunch of chairs lined up in rows. Some are empty, but most have people in white outfits and goggles on. They have their heads rolled to the side or the front.

"They put the new ones in the back. In another room until they stop talking," Quentin says as he leads us down the center walkways between the chairs. There are so many as we walk by. Quentin leads us to the room in the back where we find two chairs. We rush to the front of them and I spot City strapped to the right chair with her head slumped forward. She has goggles on and these little things stuck to her head blinking a sharp red light every few seconds. Whatever it is, it doesn't seem active. She's malnourished and thinner than before. She's in a dirty white T shirt and white sweats. Her wrists and ankles are bound.

I rush toward her and hold her face in my hands. Her hair is oily and curls near her forehead. Her eyes are closed and her cheeks look like she'd been crying. Her cheeks don't puff out like they usually do.

"Why is she so thin?" I ask Quentin.

Quentin answers as he undoes Sammy's straps. "They get basic nutrients injected in their bloodstream every night, but it's not quite enough to maintain weight levels. People pay more to annex thinner people. Less to feed in the long run." Quentin goes back to undoing the straps of his sleeping husband. I try to forget what he just told me, but I know I never will.

I turn to City. I touch her arm and notice how cold she feels. I take off my hoodie and put it around her. "City," I say, patting her cheek softly. "Wake up." I try to keep the tears out of my voice. She groans slightly and starts to stir. "She's not waking up."

"She's probably in the therapy. Take off the sensors on her temples and the goggles. It'll stop it," Quentin says.

I do as he says and City stares blankly before looking at me.

"City?"

"No. Not again," she whimpers. "Not another trick."

"It's me. I'm real, Chōkarī."

"Rose?"

I nod quickly. "I promise. We're getting you out of here." I rub her cheek gently, and I feel a tear on my thumb. More and more come.

"Don't leave me," she whispers as she turns into my palm. She cries into my hands, her teeth try to gnaw at me, trying to grip me with anything she can.

“I promise, I’ll never leave you,” I say before moving my hands to unbuckle her restraints.

“Rosalie!” she screams. “Don’t leave!” She shoves her face into the bend of my neck and I hug her with one arm. I undo her restraints with one hand. I notice she has burns on her wrists. Once she’s free, she clings to me hard as I undo her straps on her ankles. She cries on my shoulder and I have to carry her out of the room. She’s so much lighter than before. She cries and, though I can feel she’s tired, she never loosens her grip on my shirt.

“This place is horrible,” Tommy spits out as we make it back to the elevator. Quentin’s husband, Sammy, is equally attached to him, tears streaming down his cheeks and his bottom lip shaking. We’re back in the mirrors, this time with more tears. I stare at City in my arms in the reflection. She keeps hugging me tighter and asking again and again,

“Is it really you?”

“It’s me, City. You’re safe now.”

We leave and Tommy glares at the security as we do. If my hands weren’t busy holding City, I’d be flipping them off. When we get outside, I feel City let go with one hand and see her raise a middle finger at the building. That’s my girl.

She sits with me in the front seat. “Fuck legality,” Tommy says as we drive off.

“Where are we going?” I ask.

“My mom’s place. There’s more space and way comfier seats than at the office. That okay with everyone?”

“That’s fine,” Quentin says. His eyes don’t leave Sammy’s direction.

“They tried to make me hate you,” Sammy whispers to Quentin.

“It’s okay, it’s over now.”

“Rose?” Tommy asks.

I feel City’s breath on my neck. It’s even and slow. I tilt the mirror down and see she’s asleep. “Yeah,” I answer. “That’s fine.”

There are nightmares again, but they're different than before. It's like they come and go, like waves at the beach, but something is fighting them. But it's all so blurry, I can't figure out what's going on.

When I finally wake up, I feel arms around me. I feel that I'm sitting, but the cold machinery isn't around my ankles or my wrists or my head. Instead, someone is stroking my hair. I blink my heavy eyelids and see a collarbone. I tilt my head a bit and see the most beautiful girl in the world.

"Rose," I say softly. My voice is harsh and it hurts to talk.

She looks down at me with tears in her eyes. "City," she says before hugging me tight and kissing me on the cheek and temple. "You're okay. You're safe, I promise."

I push up against her, letting her warmth spread over me. I pull her close with whatever I can grab, which is mostly just her t-shirt. Rose lets go a little and runs a thumb over my cheek and it takes everything in me not to cry.

"Here," Rose says reaching for a clear water bottle with a straw. "You're probably dehydrated."

I nod and sip on the straw like a child. The water is room temperature, but still tastes as good as cold water.

"Not too much, okay?" Rose says. "Small sips."

I nod again and let go of the straw. "How long?"

Rose runs her hand over my hair. Then runs her thumb over my cheek. "A few hours. Tommy healed your burns while you were asleep." She pulls at one of my sleeves to reveal my wrists. They aren't burned anymore, just red.

“Oh.” I’m not sure how to react to anything right now. How are people supposed to react to being rescued from a slave building? “Where is Tommy?” I ask instead.

“Taking Quentin and Sammy back to their car at the office,” she says. “Did you know Mr. Scott was gay? Or that he was married?”

I arch an eyebrow. “No.” Quentin was my goggled friend’s husband. Small world. “Where are we?” I ask.

“At Rita’s,” Rose tells me. “She’s making soup right now. Mostly broth for you.”

“Why broth?”

“Because,” Rita says, setting a tray down on the coffee table, “you haven’t eaten in quite a while, so you need to start slowly.” It smells like steamed veggies and chicken and salt and has me sitting up to get closer to the bowl. I slide down to sit on the floor in front of the coffee table. Rose follows suit and we sit on the soft carpet bringing spoonfuls to our lips.

“Thank you, Rita,” I say. “It’s delicious.”

She smiles at me. “I’ve heard yours is better.”

I smile and go back to eating. My left hand reaches for Rose’s under the table. She runs her thumb over the back of my hand and I let out a nice long breath. We eat silently as Rita leans back watching over us. She reminds me of my grandmother and how she would watch over me and my cousins as kids. As we get close to empty bowls, she starts to talk again.

“I wanted to wait until you were awake to start talking about plans for the next year or so.”

Rose and I finish up and make our way back up to the couch. We sit side by side, but hands still held tightly. “We free City,” Rose says. “That’s the plan.”

“That’s easier said than done, Rosie Cake.”

“I just need to be able to provide City an income and job, right? I have the money and she has the skill to cook, so?”

Rita shakes her head gently. “Your account is still linked to your Mother’s. On paper this means you don’t have the ‘financial maturity’ to free City.”

“Financial Maturity?” Rose asks.

“Financial Maturity,” Rita repeats.

I roll my eyes. I shouldn’t be surprised from a society that enslaves gay brown kids.

“So, I can’t free her?”

“Not yet. But your account gets unlinked when you turn twenty-five and get your trust fund.”

“That’s two months away,” I say. Rose looks at me.

“You know my birthday?”

I glance at Rita who is smiling at us with a slightly arched eyebrow. Despite the fact that she’s an adoptive mother, Rita looks just like her child right now. “Yeah, of course,” I mumble to Rose.

“So, City can be free in two months?”

Rita lets out a sigh. “Not yet. You can start the process when you turn twenty-five, but it can take a long time.”

Rose moves our hands to her lap and she puts both her hands around mine.

“Until then,” Rita begins. “Do you feel safe going back to your apartment?”

Rose looks at me. I look back but in my mind all I see is the apartment. Our home, but also the place I got cut on my neck and taken away.

“No one stopped them from taking you,” Rose says. “I can’t be there if they’re just going to take you again.”

“And there’s the issue of your unemployment,” Rita says.

I turn to Rose. “Your what?”

“I quit Hart to Heart. My mom can find a new heir. I won’t do it.” She looks over me. “I won’t be associated with anyone who would do this to you.”

“You did this for me?”

She nods.

“I agree with you, Rosie Cake, but this puts you in a pre-annexable position,” Rita says.

I remember the month my dad was unemployed and they sent him an Unavoidable Email with his Notice of Pre-Annexability. My dad broke several glass bottles in the back yard that night. Even after three years, we still couldn’t walk in the back yard without shoes. I did once when I snuck back home from a girl’s house and I got glass in my foot. It was small and bloody when I finally got it out.

“And in these cases it helps to be well protected,” Rita continues. “So, if you’re up for it, you both could stay here until we sort things out and start the freeing process.”

Rose looks at me again.

“What about Henry?” I ask her. “Ishita’s not gonna hurt him is she?”

“I’ll call him and let him know. I’ll make sure he’s taken care of until we figure things out.”

“Okay.”

“Okay,” Rose says turning to Rita. “Sounds like a plan.”

She smiles and collects the bowls onto the tray. “Okay, let me call Thomas to get your things on her way back.” She reaches for the tray, but stops and sits back down. “I forgot one thing.”

We wait for her to continue.

“Where is City’s annexation bracelet?”

I feel all my blood drop down to my feet and out of me.

“At the apartment. Why?” Rose asks.

“She needs to have it back on or she could be wrangled again. And we can’t have three strikes.”

I stare at our hands. I bring my other hand to the bundle on Rose’s lap. I wonder how long we’ll have to be together with naked wrists. And how long we’ll have to wait to be that way again.

I trace my way up her arms up to look at Rose. Her eyes are hard and protective and for once I let go of the tension in my shoulders and push my face against her neck. If I’m to be hers, at least let her protect me.

Rita sets us up in one of the guest bedrooms downstairs. City is still weak, so it's best not to make her move too much. Rita goes around taking blankets from the storage closet and bringing them to us. Tommy drops off a few things with Rita then heads to her own guest room for bed; it's been a long day for everyone's favorite lawyer. The Crawfords have always had an absurd amount of guestrooms. Edmund always said it was an old house for a huge family, but that he was an only child, so why not share his house with all the people he loved.

The whole thing reminds me of staying over after the Crawford Christmas parties when I was little. Tommy and I would stay up all night in her room until Rita or Edmund would come and make a deal with us. We could only keep playing if we stayed awake through one chapter from an old accounting book. We tried every year, but we could never make it past those boring pages.

"Okay," Rita says, setting a neat pile of extra clothes on the bed next to City. On top of the clothes is City's open bracelet, but we all ignore it. "You have clothes, blankets. Rose knows where everything is, but all toiletries and towels are in the bathroom." She flattens one of the blankets, possibly to just have something to do with her hands. She lets out a deep breath and says, "Is there anything else you two need?"

I look at City and she shrugs sleepily. "I think we're okay. Thank you, Rita. For everything."

"Of course, Rosie Cake," she says. "I'll be just upstairs. I'll leave my door open if you two need anything."

I nod.

Rita runs a hand over City's arm, making her smile. She gives me a kiss on the forehead. "Goodnight, girls," she says and closes the door behind her.

City drops back onto the bed, with a groan. She reaches out a hand to me. "Sleep," she commands.

"Not yet, it's shower time."

City groans. "No, too tired. Can't stand."

"That's why there are tubs," I say as I stand over her. She throws her arms over her eyes. "Come on, you have several days of sweat on you. It's not healthy."

City groans again and I walk into the bathroom to start running a bath. I press the Medium Hot (102°) button and set the tub to stop automatically. I look back at the settings and add bubbles, cause it just seems like something City needs right now. I take the shampoo and conditioner and body wash and set them down next to the tub.

I walk back and find City exactly where I left her. I pull her up gently and she wraps her arms around my shoulders. I sit her down next to the tub.

I look down at City. All sleepy eyes and droopy posture. I swallow hard before asking, "Do you want help with your clothes?"

She looks down for a moment, then nods. I swallow again and unzip her hoodie. Her white t shirt is sweat stained and I recall finding her, sweaty despite the unbearably cold room. I pull the ends up and she raises her arms up slightly.

I hold her up and push her sweats down until she can sit back down again. I slide her socks and pants off. Her ankles are red, probably from the straps that held her in place. I look over her as she rubs her eyes. "Do you want them all off?"

She laughs suddenly. "It's okay, Princess, I'll deal with these and get in. You look like you're about to spontaneously combust."

I feel my whole face go warm. "I'll just turn around then."

I face the doorway and wait patiently, hearing City's every move. Her skin sticks to the tub a little as she takes her underwear off and she groans a bit as she takes the sports bra off. Then there's the sound of her getting into the tub. "All covered up," City says and I turn around, grateful for bubbles.

"Is it okay? Not too hot?"

She shakes her head. "It's perfect. Thanks," she says, closing her eyes and flashing a smile. She beautiful. I roll up my pants and sit with her between my legs. City leans her head on my thigh and it makes my heart thump. "You getting in too?"

"Not tonight. I have to make sure you're taken care of. I'm gonna wet your hair okay?"

She nods and I cup water in my hands and work my way up to the top of her head. I reach for the shampoo bottle and put a bit more than usual in my palm. I rub some into my other palm then into her hair. City lets out a soft sigh and I swallow hard once again.

"I forgot how nice that is, having someone play with your hair," City says. Her voice is still pretty scratchy and rough, but now its deeper because of how sleepy she is.

"I'll take your word for it."

"You never got that?" she asks.

I shrug. "I can't remember." I start massaging her scalp to get the oil out, and she lets out a much more audible moan. "It, uh, it sounds like, like you like it," I say and curse my inability to talk like a normal person. It makes City smile again and I feel blessed.

After her hair is adequately clean, I rinse it once more. Her wet hair reminds me of the night we first kissed. I remember the water tracing over her and her laughter. I lean over and kiss the top of her head.

Next, I squeeze body wash onto a wet washcloth. City shivers a bit when I start to scrub her shoulder.

“Is that okay?”

She seems to blush a bit, but nods. “Keep going,” she says. I do as instructed.

She has knots in her shoulders and I vow to give her a better massage soon. Maybe in our own bed, but probably sooner than that. She shivers again when I scrub along her spine.

“I’m okay,” she says before I can ask.

I nod and move to her arms. The further down her arms I get, the more City seems to tremble. “City?”

“I missed you,” she says. “In there.”

We haven’t spoken about what happened to her. We haven’t had the chance. “I missed you. Out here. I was so worried.”

“That’s so weird. Having someone worry about me.”

It breaks my heart that she says that. I lift her hand and clean her wrist gently. It’s bruised and swollen. I set it back down in the water, not wanting to think about how it has to be in another shackle soon. “I’m always going to worry about you, Citlali Martinez.”

She’s quiet, but when I ask her to turn around, so I can scrub her chest, I see tears on her cheeks. She runs her arm over her face and I let her sit in her minute privacy. There’s only the sound of water splashing and a few snuffles.

At the end, City washes her face, letting the water run down her arms. She stops moving for a little and she starts shaking. When I hear her little whimpers, I pull her close and she cries into my shirt. City tries to swallow back her tears, but only can long enough to say, “Bed, please,” before she starts up again.

When I set her on the bed, she’s still sniffing. She grips onto my shirt like she had when I carried her out of that horrific place. I brush her tears away with my thumbs and kiss her cheeks. This makes her cry even more.

I pull back and she lowers her towel to reveal her scar. I look up and her lip is still trembling, but she stares at me with a request she can’t seem to say.

I lean forward and kiss her scar. Her breath hitches when I do, and when I look up she’s biting her lip.

“It’s okay,” I tell her and kiss her on her cheek right under her tear. “It’s okay.”

I make my way over her other scars on her chest stomach and thighs, waiting each time for her to reveal them from under the towel. I kiss her red ankles and wrists and keep her right wrist in my hand for a little. She holds my wrist with her other hand.

After a bit, I stand up in front of her. I move the bracelet off the pile of pajamas and set it to the side to be able to get her a shirt. I roll it up to the collar and help get it over her head. Then her arms and I pull it down over the towel before she pushes it away. Next are her pajama pants, but City gets up to pull them all the way up. They’re big on her; everything is big on her. I take the towel and go hang it up in the bathroom. And since I’m already there, I drain the tub.

I feel a pair of arms hug me around the back. City squeezes me a little and I pat her hand.

“Sorry,” she says. It’s muffled from having her face against my back. “I just…” She doesn’t finish. Just keeps holding on. All of her energy born from the bone broth has been used in staying close to me.

“It’s okay,” I say as I turn around and kiss the top of her head.

I learn how to put toothpaste on my toothbrush with one hand while the other is in City’s. We brush teeth holding hands. We rinse away the taste of today and the last few days holding hands. She avoids looking at the mirror.

I try to let go to change into pajamas, but she begs, “Please. I’ll close my eyes.”

I nod and again keep her hand in mine while I change, switching it to the other as needed. She closes her eyes for a few seconds then stares at the bed. When I’m done, I take her face in my free hand. “What happens when you close your eyes?”

She looks at me and her bottom lip trembles. “I’m so weak.”

“What?”

“I was only there for a week and I couldn’t even deal. I’m such a wimp.”

“This isn’t a question of strength or bravery,” I tell her. She looks up at me with tears in her eyes. “City, that was psychological torture. It’s designed to break you, no matter how tough you are.”

She looks down again and chews on the inside of her cheek. A small tear falls down her cheek, but she says nothing. She’s still disappointed.

“You’re a fighter, Chōkarī.”

This makes her drop her head even more. “But I didn’t fight back. I didn’t scream or nothing.” She swallows hard. “He even let go of my mouth because he knew I wasn’t gonna scream.”

She's silent and I remember the scars on her thighs. Boys, she had said. I swallow down the desire to hunt them down right now. Their deaths doesn't matter right now. Only City matters. She leans forward slightly and sits her forehead on my chest.

"None of this is your fault. None of it," I tell her. "Nothing."

She's quiet again, but soon, softly she asks, "You promise?"

I hug her again. "I promise."

She squeezes me then pulls me toward the bed. She gets in on one side and I go around to the other side. I spot the gold bangle sitting next to the empty spot where Rita had piled our pajamas.

City sits up and reaches for it. She holds it in her hands. She's never held it before now. She's only ever worn it and I wonder what it feels like to hold it. A moment later, she hands it to me. It's cold and hard. It looks weird unlocked. Like an actual bracelet.

"Maybe we can leave it off. At least for tonight," I suggest. "Be free for a little."

City shakes her head. "It's not real. Bracelet or not, I'm not free," she says, before sticking out her wrist. "Just get it over with."

I stare at the red line of her wrist as I hold the bracelet open underneath. Red and gold. Blood and Money.

"Wait," she says. She lowers my hand and kisses me. She kisses me hard like she won't see me for years.

But she tastes like salt and everytime she gasps for air, it rubs up against another sob. Soon, she pulls away and rubs her eyes with the back of her wrist.

"Okay," she says. "I'm ready."

I take her wrist and kiss the tears off of it. And after I swear to myself this is the last time,
I close the bracelet around City's wrist.

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