

KE ULIULI

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## Introduction

Although I was an avid devourer of books from a young age, the first kind of formative storytelling for me as a writer were the kind of stories that you can only really find at the outskirts of family gatherings. I can remember so many late nights, sitting or standing silently near the huddle of aunties and uncles, tutus and papas, listening to them talk story. Not the talk story that you let loose under the harsh fluorescent lights in the main hall at Key Project or beneath the low ceilinged He‘eia Banquet Hall. Those places are too stuffy for the stories that nourished me as a child, for the gossip, dirty jokes, disputes, for the darker side to a round of wala‘au-ing amongst family and friends. These were the stories that felt like secrets, like the half-siblings that you can only call cousin or the unnamed love that you have learned to swallow.

As a writer, I have always been compelled to tell stories like the ones I grew up with. Funny, angry, at times very ugly, but what was most important was that the stories I grew up with were about us. They were about my family, about our friends, about the people we loved and even the ones we hated. This was the first narrative tapestry that I had ever really been invested in and so, it honestly took me by surprise that when other people told stories about us, about Hawaiians, we were flat. We could only ever be a handful of things -- fat and if not fat then at the very least we had to be sexy. We weren't interesting. We had no thoughts beyond what white storytellers needed us to think to carry on their character development. But what was perhaps worst of all, we were shown to be silly.

The Hawaiians I grew up seeing on the screen or reading about in books were nothing like the ones I saw every day. Stupid, brutish, punchlines for television shows like *The Suite Life of Zack and Cody* where the joke is “look at these silly natives! Look at how they speak

‘hookidookilau kakalakado’ or whatever. Isn’t it so silly? Isn’t it so ridiculous?” And it was, but it wasn’t us.

There was a time when I didn’t even really realize that I was supposed to be the butt of the joke in these instances. I didn’t even recognize myself up on the screen. I recall being ten or twelve watching that scene in *The Lion King* when Timon and Pumbaa have to distract the hyenas. I’d seen this scene multiple times and I’d known that Timon is supposed to be doing the hula and that was the joke, but I don’t think I really understood what they were saying in that moment. Some of my cousins had been hula dancers when we were younger. I’d spent many a long, humid afternoon sitting on the cool concrete floors of their garages threading lei and lei po‘o, stringing together layers and layers of kī leaf into skirts for their upcoming performances. The dedication, the secrecy, the utter love with which that they practiced their art! I can still recall the bent knees, raised heel, the long uncut black hair swaying. And it took me all my life up until that point to realize that to a lot of people that cartoon meercat in “drag” inviting hyenas to eat his friend was doing the same thing as my cousins. To them, the “hula” in the movie was the only hula there was.

But it wasn’t just a couple of children’s shows that would depict Hawaiians as buffoon. Hawaiians and Hawai‘i were always a perpetual punchline. In the closing chapter of *Hollywood’s Hawai‘i: Race, Nation, and War*, titled “The New Cultural Amnesia in Contemporary Cinema and Television”, Delia M. C. Koznett discusses the way that popular contemporary cinema continues the colonial project through its depictions of Hawai‘i and its native peoples. In this chapter, Koznett discusses the Adam Sandler film *50 First Dates* a film that puts at its center white characters while pushing Hawaiian ones to the periphery (196). The only “Hawaiian” character that gets any real amount of screen time is Rob Schneider’s Ula, a

racist, offensive caricature of a local, Native Hawaiian played by an actor who is neither local nor Native Hawaiian. It was clear that Native Hawaiians were either a joke or, in the case of genres like science fiction or fantasy, we were nothing at all.

In *Ke Uliuli*, I wanted to tell a story that felt like the ones I grew up hearing in the dark. I wanted to see the people I know, the people I love in a place they aren't often allowed to be, the center. At the heart of this novella is a young Hawaiian woman who has lost the ability to connect. Her memories, her feelings, her wants and desires are all at the center and the driving force behind the story. I chose to place her in the future and, although it's a bleak future, I wanted to reassure myself that those stories that I loved so much will still be there. In the future, Hawaiians will still be failing at marriages and falling in love. Even if at some point in the future, the world is ending, we will still be there, together telling each other our stories.

#### Machines and Mechanisms: Genre, Content, and Form

I first started writing what would eventually become *Ke Uliuli* in 2012, after the passing of my paternal grandmother. In its original incarnation, the story was not really a story but was a dialogue that I had written as part of an exercise that my therapist at the time had me do. Towards the end of one of our sessions, she handed me a little black box and told me to imagine that inside the box was something that would allow me to speak to whomever I'd like, living or dead. Not only could I speak to anyone, but I could also say whatever I wanted and there would be no consequences. The other person wouldn't be able to say anything back and there would be no consequences for what I said, no fallout whatsoever. After that session was finished, the idea of the black box and the magical mechanism within it stuck with me.

In reality, there wasn't anything inside the box, no fantastic machine or magical item. It was just a cassette tape container that my therapist had painted black and glued shut, but the concept of it continued to fascinate me especially as it related to talking to people who had already passed away. If we had the ability to speak to people that were gone, what kinds of things would we say to them? If they could, unlike my therapist's exercise, answer her back, what kinds of conversations would emerge? While I was conceptualizing and planning out *Ke Uliuli*, the little black box became a machine called a CCT unit that uses collective memory to recreate someone who has passed away. They would look like the deceased, be able to talk like them, even think like the person who had passed. In *Ke Uliuli*, through the magic of the CCT unit, much like the black box that my therapist had given me, Ho'oleina is able to meet with her ex-wife, Clementine, despite her ex-wife having already passed on.

Because of the CCT unit and because it takes place in a post-apocalyptic world, I think that *Ke Uliuli* fits well into the science fiction genre, but I also hoped to imbue it with elements of magical realism as well. There is a kind of lovely tension in magical realism, between the fantastic and the mundane. Although it's a machine that brings her back, there's something magical and gruesome about Ho'oleina spending most of the story talking to the dead. I kept playing around with the balance of grotesque and mundane. Both Ho'oleina and Clementine poke fun at Clementine being deceased. And most of the time, they carry out their conversations as though they're any other couple. But there are moments where the "magic" bleeds through; even when Ho'oleina thinks to herself that Clementine looks human, looks alive she does so only because she knows that Clementine isn't either of those things anymore. So, beyond the mechanics of the world, its hard rules and logics, I think magical realism is what informs the emotional aspects of the story.

## Keeping It Weird: Influential Texts and Literary Movements

As a post-apocalyptic story, *Ke Uliuli* takes place in a world that is the result of a catastrophic event or series of catastrophic events. In the case of this story, the apocalypse comes as the result of constant warfare until there is just no one left to fight. In a sense, humanity just tires itself out, and at the point in time when the story takes place there is no intention of trying to restore it. In post-apocalyptic stories the heroes are often either struggling to survive or struggling to achieve some kind of return to a pre-apocalypse moment. The driving force behind these kinds of narratives is the desire for humanity to thrive once more. No such desire or intention exists in *Ke Uliuli*. There's no real struggle for survival but there's also no hope for things to return to the way they once were. It's somewhat bleak but my hope was also to provide a post-apocalyptic world that took the burden of survival off the table. I had hoped to depict the end of the world in a highly mundane way to the point where it felt natural.

For *Ke Uliuli*, I wanted to create a somewhat softer post-apocalypse and the emotional identity of the world that *Ke Uliuli* takes place in was influenced mainly by two works, Victoria Nālani Kneubuhl's short story "Manōwai" and John Dominos Holt's novel *Waimea Summer*. In "Manōwai", a young woman, Kanoë, goes to Kona on Hawai'i island after breaking things off with her partner, Frank, due to his infidelity and general disrespect of their relationship. While there, she encounters a freshwater pool where she has an encounter with a shark-man, a creature that takes both the shape of a man and a shark. Kneubuhl's short story can be considered magical realism but I would argue that it shifts the traditional structure of the genre which "represents both fantastic and real without allowing either greater claim to truth" (Warnes 3).

In Kneubuhl's short story, there is no separation between the real and the fantastic because in Hawaiian storytelling, in the tradition of mo'olelo, what is fact and what is story are not necessarily mutually exclusive. Instead of a narrative structure that predicated on Western notions of what is real and what is not, Kneubuhl's story is rooted in the Hawaiian storytelling tradition which doesn't need to separate out what is and isn't real. What this creates is a uniquely kanaka maoli version of magical realism that is really neither magical nor real but something that both sits between the two concepts and encompasses it. One of the ways that Kneubuhl is able to establish this Hawaiian magical realism is the way in which she uses natural settings that are inspired by real places. The titular freshwater pool, Manōwai, is based on Luahinewai, which is located at Kiholo Bay. Following Kneubuhl's lead, I also based much of the natural sites within *Ke Uliuli* on real places. The house that Ho'oleina lives under is based on the house that my grandfather grew up in in Waikane and the river that is mentioned alludes to Waikane river. By evoking these real places within the story, I hoped to bring an element of magical realism into the piece and generate a similar uncanny and somewhat liminal quality to what Kneubuhl achieves in her short story.

In Holt's *Waimea Summer*, I drew inspiration from the way in which the novel utilizes gothic elements to create an underlying sense of dread. *Waimea Summer* is the story of a young man who goes to visit his uncle's farm in Waimea. While there, he grapples with his emerging sexuality and his own ambiguous identity. From the moment the novel begins, Holt's protagonist is locked into this feeling of perpetual dread because he stuck in a liminal space. Although Holt is able to sustain that dread throughout his novel, I was only able to utilize it in a few key moments, especially when it came to Ho'oleina's later interactions with Clementine as her ex-wife is revealed to be more than just a replica of the woman that Ho'oleina had previously

known. Holt's ability to create a sustained atmosphere of dread within the lush beauty of Waimea provided for an emotional landscape that was both dreamlike and nightmarish. In *Ke Uliuli*, I aimed to create something of that dichotomous emotional landscape.

When it came to worldbuilding, it was important to me that the world felt empty but still alive. In the post-apocalyptic world of *Ke Uliuli*, I attempted to create a natural world that wasn't necessarily dead but on that humanity was largely divorced from. The construction of the world in *Ke Uliuli* was somewhat influenced by Jeff VanderMeer's *Annihilation*, as well as by the New Weird subgenre in general.

The New Weird is a subgenre that is an outgrowth of its predecessor, the Lovecraftian tradition of weird fiction. In Lovecraftian fiction the focus is on fear, fear of the other, fear of the unknown. Because discovery of the fearful subject is where Lovecraftian fiction typically ends, works within this category struggle to go any further than a recognition of fear. The New Weird and New Weird writers like VanderMeer, seek to not necessarily go beyond the fear of the unknown but to go a little further into it. According to VanderMeer, the New Weird distinguishes itself from "old" weird through its two main influences, the New Wave fiction of the 1960s and "the unsettling grotesquery" of 1980s authors like Clive Barker. New Weird fiction also differs from Lovecraftian old weird fiction in the way it treats the objects of fear within its narratives. Whereas in Lovecraftian fiction the sudden awareness or discovery of the fearful subject, your Cthulus and Kassogthas, is where the horror takes place, for the New Weird the horror comes in accepting the fearful subject and even being assimilated by it.

During the process of working on this thesis, *Ke Uliuli* experienced a shift in perspective, from third person to first person. When I had first planned out the story, I had intended for the first half of the novella to be told from a limited third-person perspective that followed mostly

Ho‘oleina’s interiority. Then at the halfway point, I planned to switch to a more omniscient collective first-person perspective that would have been voiced by Clementine or rather by the layered, amalgamate identity that encompasses all the people that the algorithm behind the CCT unit had been over time. Ultimately, while I think this was conceptually an interesting plan, it didn’t quite fit the emotional landscape of the piece. Instead, the entire novella is written in first person, in Ho‘oleina’s voice. As I continued working on the project, it became apparent that even when I was writing in third person, it was also very close to Ho‘oleina’s voice, so it was a natural shift into the first-person perspective.

#### Safe as Houses: Aesthetics and Style

There is almost always a house somewhere in my fiction. During my time in this master’s program, every single piece of fiction has prominently featured a house and that’s because I think that houses are somewhat unsettling in fiction. All the houses in my fiction are haunted and that is true of the house, Kamaka‘ele, in *Ke Uliuli*. Although the novella sits soundly in the science fiction and speculative genres, *Ke Uliuli* is also a story about a haunting. In previous drafts, the generated replicas of the deceased were nicknamed “Spooks” to further drive home the idea that when Ho‘oleina interacted with Clementine, she was essentially interacting with a ghost. But the house in *Ke Uliuli* is not haunted by Clementine alone but also by what she represents to Ho‘oleina, their failed relationship, Ho‘oleina’s inability to achieve real and lasting intimacy with another person. Even before Clementine arrives, there is something about the house that she is both drawn to and repelled from, the fearful and desirous thing.

The houses in my fiction always tend to express some kind of underlying desire. The underlying desire of Kamaka‘ele is the desire to be known and understood. There was a quote from a *New York Times* article that went viral and became a meme back in 2013, around the time when I’d first started writing *Ke Uliuli*. In the last paragraph of the article, the author, Tim Kreider, talks about his friend’s dream:

Years ago a friend of mine had a dream about a strange invention; a staircase you could descend deep underground, in which you heard recordings of all the things anyone had ever said about you, both good and bad. The catch was, you had to pass through all the worst things people had said before you could get to the highest compliments at the very bottom. There is no way I would ever make it more than two and a half steps down such a staircase, but I understand its terrible logic: if we want the rewards of being loved we have to submit to the mortifying ordeal of being known.

The house in *Ke Uliuli* and the houses within my prose in general tend to operate in a similar way to the invention that Kreider is talking about. For Ho‘oleina, Kamaka‘ele provides the stage upon which she has the opportunity to be known intimately. In their last moments together, Ho‘oleina and Clementine are able to admit to one another that which they found too mortifying to say aloud when they were still together (and in Clementine’s case, still alive). However, before any real reconciliation is achieved within the narrative, their time together ends. Instead of a certain end to their story, I decided to give them a more ambiguous one where their reconciliation is impending and somewhere on the horizon but hasn’t quite arrived yet.

## ‘ōlelo hawai‘i and Pidgin in *Ke Uliuli*

I made use of both ‘ōlelo hawai‘i and Pidgin within this novella. The title of the novel in ‘ōlelo hawai‘i can mean a few different things. The word uliuli can be translated to mean “blue” and often that is how it’s used. There’s a popular song that is taught to students, most often in elementary school, called Na Waiho‘olu‘u. In the song, the Hawaiian names for ten different colors are recited. When I was in elementary school, the word used for “blue” was polū which is used to refer to clothes that are blue or other objects of Euro-American origin that are the color blue. But in recent years, Na Waiho‘olu‘u has been revised and polū has been replaced with uliuli. However, unlike polū, uliuli does not have any kind of straightforward English translation. In “How Blue Is His Beard?: An Examination of the 1862 Hawaiian-Language Translation of ‘Bluebeard’” Bryan Kuwada discusses the choice to use uliuli when translating the “blue” of Bluebeard, especially because uliuli does not have the same symbolic meaning that “blue” is meant to convey in Charles Perrault’s story. Instead of the cold and unnatural feeling of unease that blue expresses in “Bluebeard”, uliuli “is very much of this world and full of its life and natural energy” (Kuwada 31). So, the title *Ke Uliuli* can be translated as “The Blue” but it can also refer to darkness and not the darkness of death or lifelessness but a very fecund and generative darkness. The uliuli in the title refers not just to the darkness of the ocean but also the darkness in Ho‘oleina’s lab and the darkness within the house. Despite Ho‘oleina being cut off from the natural world, uliuli is still able to reach her.

The rad storms are also given names, ‘aimoku, ‘alelo‘ula, and kalanihūhū. ‘Aimoku, somewhat a reference to Kukailimoku, roughly means “island eater.” ‘Alelo‘ula’s name means “red tongue” and kalanihūhū means “angry sky.” All the rad storms are given names that convey

a feeling of tumult and violence. However, the storms themselves are conveyed as somewhat mild, especially when compared to the interpersonal drama that unfolds between Ho‘oleina and Clementine. I hoped to create a dichotomy between the names of these storms and their actual behaviors, roles, and descriptions within the narrative.

The only character who speaks in pidgin is Tutu. This was mainly because Tutu was largely based on my own paternal grandmother who only spoke in pidgin. All of the pidgin used in the novella is based not on any formalized pidgin but solely on my grandmother’s way of speaking. Tutu speaks in pidgin also because she is represented within the narrative as an in-between figure. She isn’t so cut off and isolated like Ho‘oleina eventually came to be, but she is also far removed from the native space. Tutu is a bridge between the natural world and the disconnected world that Ho‘oleina inhabits and so too is the way that she speaks.

1.

The dark, glowing mouth of the storm yawns open above. As always, alelo‘ula is right on time. I’ve been tracking its trajectory for four years now, following it as it carves a path across the atmosphere over the Pacific, and it has never failed to arrive according to schedule. In the hours after the installation crew left, alelo‘ula’s great glowing body crawled up over the crooked, black back of the Ko‘olau Range; it unhinged its jaws and devoured the sky and with it any sunlight that the day had to offer. The whole island is cast in an unnatural light from the storm’s radiation bloom pulsing overhead. Beside me, the faintly glowing figure of my ex-wife shifts and turns to look at me.

“You look like shit, Lei.”

She’s smiling as she says this. I can’t see it, I’ve opted to keep my eyes on the horizon, but I hear it clearly, the sound of her voice conveying the image of her wrinkled eyes, both her cheeks pinched by dimples. The left corner of her mouth is just a little higher than the other, the right side rippled by a scar that runs nearly to the bottom of her ear and when she smiles, it’s always a little lopsided. It has always amazed me how Clementine could smile while throwing a punch. She’s never been one to falter or balk at a little bit of verbal violence. But all in all, she isn’t necessarily wrong. I *do* look like shit.

“Well, if that isn’t the shit calling the shit shit,” I reply.

The words slip as easily as air out of my mouth. The regret comes not even a second after. Unlike my ex-wife, I have never had a taste for blood, but Clementine has a way of engulfing you, making you assimilate to her way of doing things. It’s easy to be caught in her

undertow, pulled into the violent rhythm of her smiling cruelty. Had it not been for love, I might have learned to hate her years ago.

An apology is sitting on my tongue, already reaching out between my lips when I hear above me a sudden bark of laughter that sounds more like a scream. The mechanical screech of something metallic running off its course. From somewhere within the biodome, a soft clicking begins. Not soft in volume but soft in the way that smothered sounds are, somewhere beneath the earth, a mechanism has begun to churn.

“Yeah, I guess dying’s been hard on me.”

I had been waiting for her to appear for hours, sitting out on the front porch steps ever since the crew had finished installing the CCT unit and left. I feel a little bad for them. They’re probably hanging somewhere over the Pacific in their buzzards, just outside of the storm’s reach. It would be at least another nine or ten hours before they’d reach the continent and another couple of hours before they reached the Congregated Domes.

When I’d first made my request for reallocation to Hawai‘i, just the number of resources and the extended flight time alone was enough to raise a few eyebrows. But even more so, it was the fact that I had requested a position for a Kettle Corp Assignment that had been labeled all but obsolete. It isn’t just that weather tracking is a mostly automated task, most Assignments could be and technically are automated, but it’s just not in fashion to live so far flung from the Congregate anymore.

The position had been first established fifty-seven years ago, in 45-Q during the Exploration period when it was fairly normal for people to venture out into a world that was finally at peace and thankfully quite empty. The islands had been a huge point of interest during the Conflict era as an advantageous foothold in the Pacific, but once things had died down and

Kettle Corp established their employment programs, Hawai‘i’s appeal stemmed more from a sense of intrigue. I had known about the position long before I’d ever actually applied for it. When I was fourteen, at the very end of my Conditioning, Kamaka‘ele had come up as one of the suggested positions based on my marks. But my Tutu was sick again and instead of putting in my requests for my first Assignment, I’d put in the paperwork for a deferral.

Even if Tutu hadn’t gotten sick, I wouldn’t have gone to Hawai‘i back then. I had every reason not to go, not least of which was that Kamaka‘ele was too far and frankly, too scary. Isolated and racked by the kind of violent weather storms that I could only dream of from the safety of my assigned quarters, the islands were and still are a dangerous place. Not to mention the rad storms. They preferred to travel over water, feeding off the hurricanes they generated with the humidity that their immense heat would produce. In fact, before I took the Kamaka‘ele position, I’d only ever seen comm-feed of a rad storm but that had been more than enough to terrify me. Of course, rad storms aren’t storms in the traditional sense. While they are often influenced and sometimes carried across distances by normal weather systems, radiation storms aren’t generated by the engine of heat and moisture rising up into colder air. They’re made up of excess radiation from past Conflicts and they make long treks across the atmosphere in great, glowing clouds of soot and heat.

Kettle Corp had had a foothold in the islands since before the first Conflict, a subtle presence with an interest in harnessing the growing nuclear energy that the Pacific Ocean was quickly beginning to accumulate in the form of great radiated weather systems that passed through occasionally. Back then, people, even the ones that headed Kettle, were always looking for the weapon, the one that would top the rest. Life had been an arms race but that was a long time ago, barely even a memory for my generation. And whatever interest anyone, Kettle Corp

included, had in Hawai‘i waned quickly as did humanity’s population. People rarely even left their living quarters these days. But the position in Hawai‘i existed and I had all the qualifications, meager as they are, that a weather tracker needed. It had been left unfilled for years, but someone had done it before. I would do it now.

“You know this is the first time I’ve ever seen a real radiation storm in the fles-,” Clementine stumbles over the word but she recovers quickly enough. “Well...in person.”

“It’s almost a hundred years old,” I say, trying my best to sound conversational.

I hate small talk, never entirely understood what the point of it is. But maybe its pity that moves me to speak or guilt for my earlier comment.

“Alelo‘ula’s been circling the globe on the same track since it formed.”

Back when it had first formed somewhere over the South Pacific Ocean, it didn’t have a name yet, just a serial number automatically assigned once its size, power, and radiation content passed a regulated threshold. Though from a far a radiation storm might be mistaken for a natural weather system, the lives they lead could not be more different. From the moment it forms, a radiation storm never loses force, it only grows or sometimes the smaller systems will be absorbed into larger ones, cracked open by a particularly violent hurricane or typhoon. But even then, the radiation that generates them doesn’t ever disappear, it just gets scooped up by another system. Most rad storms that travel over the Pacific have at some point either been cut down or completely broken by the violent weather systems that the vast body of water generated with its sheer size and the levels of humidity that it produced. But alelo‘ula is special. In all the decades since its birth, alelo‘ula has never changed. Never lost speed or been broken.

I finally spare her a glance and take in the glowing figure of my ex-wife besides me. A CCT unit has a tracker for organic bodies. When it first starts up, the CCT unit will place its

generated subject as near as possible to the living recipient. Clementine had appeared just to the right of the porch steps' railing, the side without the clutch of ti leaf plants. She hadn't moved an inch since she'd blinked on except to speak.

“A hundred years is a long time to live,” she says.

From a certain perspective, it must seem that way. People rarely lived past sixty these days and even that's becoming rarer and rarer. But alelo'ula is young, most rad storms had been birthed during the Conflicts when people still thought it made sense to wield nuclear power as though it wasn't a double-edged sword. Other rad storms have become too heavy, too slow to move much anymore and end up circling round and round the same few hundred mile stretch but alelo'ula is a rad storm of the new age.

“It will probably out-live us all.”

“It's already outlived me.”

2.

It isn't a surprise that Clementine is dead. I'd known for some time now that her health was in decline. Even before the divorce, I'd seen the telltale signs, the sudden sluggishness, the dark spots like bacteria blooms on her skin. She'd seemed thinner the last time I saw her as well. It's rare to contract, let alone die of radiation poisoning these days but Clementine had spent the majority of her childhood out in the open, beyond the protection of the Congregate domes. And though it had lay dormant in her body for the bulk of her life we had always known that there was a good possibility of a flare up. It isn't a surprise that my ex-wife is dead, it isn't even all that surprising that at some point in her last days she had apparently gone through the trouble of filling out the paperwork of requesting something as archaic as CCT. Clementine had always been awfully prone to nostalgia. What I didn't understand is why it's me she's come to -- if she'd wanted to use this one last ditch effort at life for the dead, I didn't understand why she'd chosen to waste it on me.

I think I must have known, to some small degree at least, what was going on as soon as I saw what was written on the large, oddly shaped box sitting neatly in the dome's delivery hatch. Although it isn't at all unusual to emerge from the observation lab that Kettle Corp had installed under the house to find that a delivery had been made, I had never received a package quite like the one that had brought Clementine to me.

It must have been around evening and I was already in the tightfitting body liner that usually came with biosuits, when I'd found it standing -- darkly opalescent and blue-shifting -- just behind the thick glass door that opened up into the delivery chute like an impatient visitor. It

arrived too early to be anything good. It was tall, taller than me by a few good inches but that isn't an incredible feat. I have been small all my life, a typical dome-baby. As the old adage goes, goldfish only grow as big as their bowl allows and I had spent my life swirling round a bundle of glass blubs, a collection of biodomes where the last of humanity had decided to huddle together and wait for the end. I had never grown beyond what meager globe the Congregate had allowed me. I'd never had to.

Even now, cast out into the vastness of the Pacific region, in self-imposed exile from the continent, my world is still so small. The biodome's diameter is just over a hundred feet, enough space to hold the house and a little extra for the surrounding yard. It's far more space than I had ever been given for my own but it's still just another glass bowl. In the four years that I had spent in the islands, I'd lived my life quite the same as I had back on the continent, pattering away the hours, days, months while working on an assignment that will ideally never be complete. The only difference now is that on an exceptionally clear day, I can see the ocean beyond the layers and layers of protective glass, shifting against the horizon like a restless animal.

There had been no hope for a view on the day the package arrived. A heavy curtain of carbon mist fell over the Windward side of Oahu, tumbling down in ropey, pale rivulets from the black range of the Ko'olaus that rose up behind the property. The mist had plunged the dome and me along with it into a shifting sea of greenish gray. Anything beyond two or three yards beyond the glass was lost in the miasma. The only sunlight that broke through spilled in weakly from above where the very top of the dome crested the mists. Not that there is much to see even on a clear day besides the ocean. Years of harsh weather systems, flooding, and the occasional radiation storm had scorched the land. Whatever life and beauty that the islands had once held crumbled to dust long ago, leaving just the bald earth, spiny and bleak like a charred skeleton but

even this is devoured by the carbon mist that had befallen the dome on the day the package arrived.

The installation crew took five days to arrive. It was bad timing though it wasn't necessarily the crew's fault. The package had shown up just before the arrival of another rad storm, 'aimoku. The violent nature of rad storms makes it difficult to plot out any kind of reliable flight plan for a buzzard and the sheer amount of radiation made it dangerous to attempt the communication of human bodies across great distances. This is true of any radiation storm, but 'aimoku most of all. Island eater -- it's a fitting name that had been bestowed upon it. Though all radiation storms had been assigned official serial numbers decades ago, one of the trackers that had previously fulfilled my position had also given the storms nicknames. They had been coded into the observation equipment in the lab. Instead of regulation notifications about the status of each rad storm, I would occasionally get messages that read "kalanihuhū is approaching from the north!"

It is impossible to know which of my predecessors had started the tradition, but I can understand why they did it. Each rad storm is unique, each had behaviors, habits, personalities even, and it was unfortunate that the mystery package had arrived along with 'aimoku. Unlike alelo'ula, 'aimoku is unpredictable. It devours not just the sky, but it plunges whole islands into its glowing darkness swallowing sometimes two or three at a time, more than earning it its name. Slow moving and clumsy, sometimes 'aimoku would squat over Oahu for weeks. Its heat is so intense that it even manages to reach past the glass of my dome and touch the air within, warming the whole space. It's tricky to plan for 'aimoku but the night that the package arrived, a strong gale had come from the northeast corralling 'aimoku's huge body southward.

In the rad storm light, Clementine is glowing. A blue hue is cast over her pale, smiling face. She looks older, as though they had spent ten years apart instead of four. Her skin looks sallow beneath the blue holo-glow and there is a weight to it, a sagging that hadn't been there the last time I'd seen her. It's clear that the CCT unit had not been made to project under rad-storm light. Although there are no mistakes or inaccuracies in the image, Clementine herself looks immaterial, without substance in this light.

“How did that go by the way? The dying, I mean,” I ask her softly.

It's the kind of question I know Clementine will appreciate. She's always had a morbid sense of humor. And sure enough, she laughs again, that sharp, metallic sound paired with the mechanic clicking of the CCT unit working overtime to account for the unexpected lighting.

“Oh, you know how these things are. It went as well as can be expected,” she replies breezily. “Not a very comfortable process.”

Her voice sounds better now, not quite as hollow and tinny but the pale sheen around her form doesn't dim at all.

“It hurt like hell to be honest,” Clementine continues and from the corner of my eye I see her shift forward.

The movement seems to be too much for the CCT unit, the clicking picks up in speed and intensity. It sounds like a low hum, the thrum of a heart beating wildly. She doesn't move quite right, parts of her lagging and faltering as she moves across the grass. Her image sways, as though she's drunk or ill. Her body distorts. Her arms curve and bend with boneless elasticity, her legs seem broken, barely managing to hold her frame up. This isn't the first time I'd ever interacted with a holographically generated image of another person. Most of the lessons in

Conditioning had been administered using similar technology. It also isn't unusual for them to distort from time to time but I had never seen anything quite like this.

“But you know,” she says, her head turning ever so slightly to the side as she calls back to me. “The view's not so bad.”

She shimmers, her form a mirage against the dome's glass. Against the dark ocean, her form shifts, twists and mangles itself into a shape that I both recognize and don't. Both human and not, her undulating rhythm almost matches that of the storm above as though she's been caught in it.

“Why are you here, Clementine?”

She looks at me over her shoulder and smiles.

3.

At first, I assumed it was a mistake, some flight planner or deliveries expert had mistakenly sent me something that I hadn't asked for. My first instinct was to report it to the home office and go on with my day. It wasn't until I saw the writing on the package that I began to think otherwise.

A notice had been haphazardly stuck on to the right face of the box, over the dark plastic wrapping. It read:

**“Property of Kettle Corp and Kettle Corp affiliates.  
Unauthorized installation prohibited. Do not attempt to maim,  
destroy, or unpack.  
#home-office”**

I'd never received anything from the home office that had carried a message like that but there was something foreboding about the wording and the message's clipped tone. Home office missives tended to be more amiable, usually featuring Kettle Corp's trademarked mascot, Buzzy the Busy Buzzard. He'd been everywhere when I was younger, and the cartoon bird is prominently featured on the boxes that all my supply drops came in. The garish caricature of a large beaked, bright eyed bird with the image of a kettle pressed into its chest had been a constant in my youth. Buzzy's catchphrase would often be paired with his image, contained in a speech bubble protruding from the cartoon bird's long, blunted beak.

**Here for the long haul!**

There is a funny sort of symmetry to that phrase. I remember seeing it everywhere when I was growing up. Buzzy is Kettle Corp's face, their iconic mascot, they'd use him on just about everything that they could. It isn't just the boxes that my supplies came in, the supplies themselves had Buzzy's bright red cartoon head. He'd show up in other places too, though sometimes less noticeably, just the outline of his shape, for example, on the bottles of the standard prescribed medication that is supposed to keep us from suffering the more gruesome effects of radiation poisoning. They'd even commissioned the production of a Buzzy cartoon that chronicled the everyday adventures of the hapless avian hero that they showed often in Conditioning. His awkward, avian form would often come waddling across com-pads, along the digital screens that lined the many brightly lit hallways of my youth and he'd spout off some catchy slogan before waddling away. Poor Buzzy, I would think to myself. He was always too large for whatever screen he'd appear in. His broad wingspan would always be scrunched up into his body and when he would walk, it was in such a cumbersome fashion that it looked painful.

*Why not just fly away, Buzzy? I used to wonder. Doesn't it hurt to walk like that just for our sake?*

I even wanted to be a buzzard operator at one point specifically because of Buzzy. When I was twelve, I put in a Request of Early Consideration so that I could begin completing the prerequisites, one of which was a flight test with a licensed operator. But Buzzy was nowhere to be found in either home office's message or anywhere on the package that had arrived. Instead, the box was eerily plain. The way it stood above me, all shiny and dark, it felt uncannily animate.

I was surprised by just how light it was when I moved it from the delivery chute to the front porch. It was clear from the get-go that it wasn't my required and preferred dietary, medical, and recreational supplies. Those packages arrived on a strict schedule, every thirty-three

days, in plain boxes that were clearly labeled. I'd entertained briefly the slim possibility that the package contained my second shipment of extra oxygen and soil that I'd requested as part of the newly approved project that I had been petitioning for the last year and a half. It was like pulling teeth, getting those corporate types to authorize any change in my oxygen levels. Though the permissions to tamper with three of Kettle Corp patented perennial tree species had come through almost instantaneously, the request for extra soil and potable water had taken months for approval. It had been a headache, but ultimately, I understood the position that the approval committees were in. Making my job difficult is part of their own assignments as much as making innocuous and continued requests is part of mine. As they say in the Congregate, the best work is work that yields more work.

But it was clear that the package had not come in response to any of my requests to the corporate office. Anything to do with my assignment or contractual obligations arrived in the same way. First, there's always a courtesy warning. The corporation buzzards use a magnetic grid to navigate and when the buzzard got within thirty miles of my dome, an alarm was triggered. Truthfully, I had gotten so used to the sound that I barely even registered it anymore, even when I was awake to hear it. In just under twenty minutes, a bright red Kettle Corp buzzard would appear on the horizon, bobbing and weaving against the blustering wind and rain that plagued the Ko'olaupoko coastline.

When the air was clear enough to see the drone's approach, I'd sometimes go out to meet it and watch it move with near sentience as it fought against the elements to get to me. Growing up, I had seen comm-feed of aviary animals, shrikes, finches, albatrosses and even real buzzards that surprisingly looked nothing like the garishly bright red Kettle Corp drones that shared the same name. Birds had been such a wonder to me, how they had glided and skated the surface of

the once-blue sky with an easy grace that I had never once witnessed in person. Seabirds had been my favorite to watch, hovering in the glowing window of my student's comm-pad. They would hang in the air, almost stationary as the effort of their wings met with the force of sea gusts, reaching an equilibrium that allowed them to defy even the fundamental truth of gravity. A buzzard's flight pattern could not even compare, fighting and gnashing at the air, but still they were entertaining to watch when I could. A nice way to pass the time, which is all anyone can ask for these days.

It is puzzling to even consider that once the great bowl of the sky had been filled to the brim with all sorts of flying things, not just birds but insects, certain mammals, and even other flying machines. They used to inhabit the firmament like a whole other nation with a populace that lived in a reality that expanded far past my own. But that graceful nation of the sky had long since passed away, along with every other nation, aviary or terrain. Only the buzzards and Kettle Corp remain, and whatever life still lingers are countrymen of nowhere.

Once the package had been moved, I considered continuing my plans for the day. I had been keeping a close eye on the tracking reports and saw that a particularly nasty rad storm had been hanging around the southern coast of Hawai'i island, 'aimoku. Though it was currently beating itself into Na'alehu there was no telling how long it would stay there. Although, 'aimoku was a slow-moving system, it was devastating in its destruction and power. Even if it managed to get within a certain proximity to Oahu while I was outside of the dome, I'd be fried for sure. And I didn't have the supplies to treat that level of nuclear char.

It's against regulation to leave my biodome for any reason other than a return flight to the Congregate. It's too dangerous, too risky, but more than anything, it would require too many resources, extra oxygen, a biosuit and of course the precautionary radiation poisoning treatments

afterwards. The costs far outweighed the benefits. There are gray areas, there always are, but I knew when I started them that the unsanctioned expeditions I began taking with the extra oxygen sat squarely in the wrong. I don't know why I started. It makes no sense to be honest and say that I felt suffocated and smothered; restricted by the wide-open sky and the empty, black earth. I had more space to myself now than I'd ever had in my entire life. Perhaps, I can say then that it was a series of mistakes, coincidences, and some lethargy on my part that led me to it.

I didn't originally intend to have a surplus of oxygen. It came about as a natural byproduct of my own laziness. At the start, when I first came here, I spent most of my time in the dusty cot I'd found tucked in the back corner in the observation lab under the house. Oxygen levels in the blood drop slightly during sleep, some alveoli even drop out of use. That alone may not have been enough to leave behind even a noticeable amount by the end of the month but naturally I'd also been avoiding my DSAHH's, the Daily Suggested Activity for Health and Happiness that Kettle sent every day. I never did them back at the Congregate either, but I wasn't on an oxygen budget back there. When I'd used almost less than 78% of the oxygen than had been allotted me, I decided to do nothing. I sent no notification to the home office; I didn't even remove the extras from the diffusion tank. It isn't a bad thing to be lazy, as the adage goes, apathy is a never-ending task. And those are the best kind.

That day that the package arrived would have been the last day for a while that I would be able to safely exit the dome in my outdated biosuit. And yet, it felt wrong somehow, to continue on with this practice that I had been taking part in for the better part of two years, now that I had a witness. There was nothing to do but wait.

So, I waited. I figured that if I wasn't authorized to open, install, destroy or even maim the package and its contents then surely someone who *was* was already on their way. And I

waited. Sure enough, by the second day, ‘aimoku arrives, lumbering across the sky and plunging the whole island into glowing darkness.

There’s no view when ‘aimoku comes, just darkness interspersed with the occasional slash of lightning. Most of the second day was spent alone in the lab. There was no point in being up near the porch if there was no clear view of the ocean. And besides, there was no way that anyone or anything, authorized or not, would be getting through ‘aimoku. Not in one piece anyway.

On the third day, I’d let my curiosity and boredom get the better of me and I decided to inspect the package further for any kind of clue as to what exactly was inside the package. What I found had only confounded me more. Printed below the plastic shrink wrapping, directly onto its cardboard’s surface, were three letters:

**i.a.c.**

The letters were done in bold black, all of them lowercase and placed at the center of three intersecting loops. Each loop was a different color, red, green, and blue. Around the letters and the colored loops was one large, white oval. It was a relic, the insignia of the International Arbitration Collective. The group had been formally dissolved over a hundred years ago, before even my Tutu’s time. There were all kinds of alliances back then, organizations, nations, collectives, all with agendas and objectives. The world had been a landmine of allegiances and treachery, impossible to tell the difference between the two. The i.a.c. had been one of the last to fall. Their severe adherence to principles of neutrality had won them a little extra time as Conflict 384 had concluded but though the i.a.c; was long gone, their technology had stuck around for decades after their demise.

By the fourth day, ‘aimoku moved south and I’d completely given up and decided to make conversation with my unwanted visitor.

“Whoever you’re waiting for to open you up should probably hurry,” I murmured to the package, still in the position I’d placed it on that first day. “Or they better have some extra oxygen. After ‘aimoku’s done here, alelo‘ula will be hot on its tail.”

As suspicious as I had originally been of the i.a.c. package when it had first invaded my little bubble, I found that I quite liked pretending to have company. It had all the benefits of not being alone with none of the downsides. Suddenly, the package’s uncanny nature became a plus, instead of disquieting. The package had a comfortable half-presence.

“Did you enjoy the buzzard flight?” I asked the morning of the fifth day. “I hated mine. It’s too noisy and it was *long*. What do operators even do for all that time?”

Operator is a misnomer. There’s no actual operating that goes on. Buzzard operators are more monitors. They sat in their operator’s seats and kept watch on the buzzard’s fuel levels, altitude but they never really have to do much besides that. Buzzard’s all run on pre-determined flight plans.

“Not that weather tracking is exactly all that exciting either but it’s a good job. It manages to pass the time.”

Though I had excelled in my natural sciences courses during Conditioning, I hadn’t ever really planned on taking a position in that field. It just didn’t yield very exciting Assignments.

“Now that ‘aimoku is going north, alelo‘ula will be following right behind from the east.”

But considering the package’s terrible timing, I have to wonder if whoever sent is knew anything about the Pacific rad-storm system in the first place. The reports, charts, and measurements of both radiated and non-radiated weather systems that I collect are sent back

daily to Kettle Corp for the express purpose of efficient flight planning but this only made the package's unexpected arrival all the more concerning. From my seat on the porch steps, I observed my silent companion. It didn't shine so much anymore, especially not like it had on that first day before the sunlight had been blotted out the dregs of 'aimoku's system. The box's opalescence had been subdued by the perpetual dim that had fallen over the Windward coastline. And though this and the natural balm of time had extinguished much of my discomfort and irritation with the package's uninvited presence, it did nothing to get rid of the feeling that whatever waited in the confines of the box were looking out at me.

“I guess we could always hunker down in the dormancy pods until the storm lets up. It'll be a tight squeeze even then, but it'll conserve our oxygen supply until 'aimoku and alelo'ula pass. We'll miss the view though.”

It's one of my favorite things about rad storms that you can get the clearest view of the ocean when they're overhead. While it's true that they tend to cast a pretty heavy shade, their radiation blooms provided a glow that kept the whole place lit like it is early evening all day and for as many days as it stuck around. The first rad storm I'd ever experienced had scared me half to death and drained all the bitterness that had driven me here, so far from her. I believed then I could have endured the humiliation and pain of seeing Clementine after everything that happened.

It was the sound that got me. Rad storms can be loud, not like a buzzard's kind of loud. The noise of a rad storm is subtle, it reverberates and vibrates from below, from the gut. A rad storm bellows at a frequency too low to hear but it could still be felt. Rad storms spoke in infrasound and I had never experienced anything like it before. I'd spent nearly a week hiding in

my lavatory, trying to keep from barfing myself into severe dehydration. It took a couple more systems passing over the islands before I discovered the precious gift of clarity that they brought.

Most of the time, the ocean, not just the Pacific Ocean but any body of water of similar size, is mostly unviewable, obscured by the immense amount of water vapor from heavy sun exposure. Even at night, the darkness and the carbon mists that fall almost perpetually over the water made it impossible to see anything. But even when I couldn't see the ocean, I believed that I could still feel it. That's what's different about Hawai'i, why I'd decided to stay despite everything. Technically, speaking, I could "see" the ocean whenever I wanted. There are terrabytes of comm-feed of the ocean, especially before Conflict 384. One of my favorites is a short clip of people gliding over the water on wooden boards. The feed's video quality is extremely poor, and it had no audio as it had been recorded before recorders had that capability, but it fascinated me how casually people used to interact with the ocean. It is astounding to think that there had been a time when the ocean had not been a radiated desert covered in nuclear mists and churned by constant carbon and radiation storms. I had seen pictures of the islands when the ocean had still been blue and the firmament above it had been clear of nuclear pollution. Often, I would gaze at renderings of what the ocean once was and wonder at how it seemed to be a bodily organ, *alive*, and like a hand stretching out its great blue fingers, it had once connected everything. But these days it seemed that the ocean had closed its fist to human eyes, opening only when the rad storms came.

4.

“What are you doing here, Clementine?”

“Why do *you* think I’m here?” she says, attempting to turn around but the motion is too much for the mechanism projecting her image.

Her body swivels around, but her head lags. Between her idle skull and her turning torso, her neck cranes, so pale and so thin, that it looks as though it is a young bamboo stalk bending just before it breaks. It only happens for a second, a moment of tumultuous discord in the uncanny cadence of her body, but still I feel my palms begin to sweat and my stomach churns.

The answer is both simple and not. To be honest, I had taken the package as a bad omen. And while my inclination towards superstition is not a trait that I’m proud of, I was right. It is the package that had brought her here.

After a half a year, I’d saved up an entire month’s supply oxygen and there it was, for no good reason. I suppose I could have sent the extra oxygen back to the home office and let them worry about it. Re-allocation isn’t part of my assignment and besides, I’m not certified for it. I could have done that, I even considered just releasing it outside of the dome, just leave the open tank in the delivery chute and hope for the best. I might have done it too had I not found the suit. It is probably a couple decades old, but it has been made to look older, a product of the nostalgia boom back when I was a kid. It’s strange. I remember when I first found it, the first thing I thought was how Clementine would have loved it, but something keeps me from bringing the suit up now.

“You’ve been glitching this whole time, you know,” I tell her.

Her smile does not budge. Clementine just shrugs. This time the movement is smooth. Though she still glows, she doesn't glitch or lag when she walks back to where I've been sitting on the porch steps.

"It's old tech," she says. "You can't expect too much from it."

Old tech that brings the dead back to life. A CCT unit is as much a relic as the i.a.c. insignia. Though they weren't the ones to invent CCT, it was the i.a.c. that had popularized its use and they had given it its official name, cessation catharsis therapy. Back in the early Conflict era, it was fairly common for people to lose not just one family member but whole branches of their family tree. And still the constant churn of war and death demanded more. The i.a.c. was largely uninvolved and uninterested in the Conflicts themselves, either in their perpetuation or discontinuance, but what they were interested in was finding a solution to the problem of the immense strife and loss of its time.

Clementine looks neither dead nor alive as she moves across the grass towards me. Her form has settled somewhat but she's lacking still. She floats more than she walks and under the rad-storm's light, she keeps her holo-glow. But at least the lag is gone and all her parts move in tandem.

"C'mon, Lei. Don't dodge the question, why do you think I'm here?" she says, now looming above me.

Clementine had always been much taller than me. She kept nearly a foot on me in all the years I had known her. Something about her blue, narrow face, the insubstantial way she moved, the look in her eyes made my stomach churn.

"I don't know. You got bored?" I reply glibly though I can hear the slight tremor in my voice.

Her face gives nothing away if she's heard it too, the scratching dryness at the back of my throat that I try to swallow down. There's no reason to be afraid of her, she isn't even necessarily my wife, just a web of data collected from her archival device. That's the real genius of the CCT unit, not the holographic projectors or the audio generators but the algorithm that stitches a person back together from the pieces they've left behind. This is all that's left, this flickering, floating ghost is all that's left of my ex-wife.

"I have to admit, dying was pretty tedious, more so than I thought it would be."

Her voice finally sounds right, the hollow tinniness is gone and though there's still something missing in it, some physical warmth, she sounds human at least. It's as though we were talking over the phone. I watch her slide up beside me and take a seat on the stair one step above my own perch. Clementine reclines back, her long form stretches up over the rest of the stairs and she rests her elbows on the wood of the porch deck. Under the shade cast by the overhanging roof, she loses her shine.

"What did you think, it was gonna be easy?"

She smiles again, her face scrubbed clean of the holo-glow looks like flesh and blood. I find my mouth moving of its own accord, bending into a smile of its own.

"Of course, you did," I say, scoffing at audacity of her entitlement.

Only Clementine would expect death to be easy for her. My eyes fall to the grass again, to the place where she'd put her bare feet to the ground. The tech had not been calibrated for outdoor use. Though she could interact well enough with the floorboards and steps, blades of grass pass into her feet. They poke out of her skin in a few places as though they had grown out of her.

I wonder how much of her is made up of my own archival data. If I reached up and touched the place just behind the shell of my right ear, I would be able to feel the slight rounded protrusion of the implant beneath the skin. What set i.a.c's CCT apart from their competitors, was their use not only of the deceased's data and memory units but that of the people around them as well. Not a single timeline but a web, a mycelium of imagery, impressions, interactions, helped to make the deceased seem realer, truer. It's how they beat out the competition, but there was no point in competition these days.

"Would ya just look at that view," Clementine says. "If I were you, I probably wouldn't have gone back to the Domes for anything either."

I hear the second meaning hiding under her words. Resentment unfurls in my chest, but I quash it down, there's no point in arguing with a ghost. She's just an echo.

My own archival device is a descendant of i.a.c's original technology. Although the information is used more so to record and analyze the lives of individuals to ensure maximum productivity and quality of life, it still had to automatically pass through the original CCT algorithm. I look over her, the sharp lines of her face, the freckled skin on her bony shoulders, the arch of her spine. How much of her came from me, from my memories, my thoughts and feelings? What had my body betrayed to the device in my head that is now created here in front of me?

"The grass is a mess."

"That's not how it always looks?"

The yard is usually immaculate completely due to Kettle Corp's patented grass. It had been designed to still be organic, look and feel like grass, but it was self-maintaining. Each blade of grass had a default setting, a code within its cells that told it when to start and stop growing.

For four years, the yard had stayed almost exactly the same as before I arrived but the installation crew needed to dig to install the sensors that the CCT unit required.

When they'd arrived on the fifth day, they did so early in the morning, even before it was fully light out. A whole flock of buzzards comes bobbing over the horizon, ten of them in all and I watched as they hovered all along the coast, hard at work. Only one of the ten approaches and enters the dome, unleashing five people all dressed in the red and yellow jumpsuit uniforms that the buzzard operators are assigned. The sight of them brings on a wave of nostalgia. There had been a time when I had aimed to don that uniform.

I must have been around twelve when I had taken the initiative of filling out the paperwork and putting in the requests to begin the prerequisites for a position as a buzzard operator, the first of which is an interview with a seasoned operator. The operator that had been assigned to me was a woman in her mid-forties. I can't remember her name at all, I'm not even sure if she told it to me but I remember it being impressive that she was so short. She was almost four times my age but still a few inches shorter than me.

*You ever seen a buzzard before?* the senior operator had asked out of the blue.

I remember jumping out of my skin when she spoke. Up until she'd asked me that question, the operator hadn't even so much as said good morning when I met her at the registration office. Instead, the operator took a few minutes to silently check over my paperwork before disappearing into the office and returning with a red and yellow uniform for me to change into. After that, we began to make our way through the bright Congregate hallways towards the outer rink, the outer most circles of domes where the buzzard hangars were housed.

On our way, I remember seeing a couple people in the halls at first. The operator didn't acknowledge them and I noticed that they didn't spare us a glance either. But as we travelled

further from the center clutch of the Domes, the hallways were completely empty and the only sound between them was their footsteps and the occasional *beep* of the pin pad buttons whenever the senior operator had to key in her clearance code to get into the set of domes.

Before then, I had never been to the outer rink, though many people never even see it in their entire lives and every year there were fewer and fewer of them. The Congregate had gradually been shrinking over the last fifty years, and more and more of the outskirt domes were decommissioned as the need for space decreased. It was simple math, positive correlation working towards optimal efficiency. As the populations gradually but steadily declined, so too did the resources expended and it's what was to be expected. This was the winding down, the long haul and they all knew it. As the old adage goes, you can't stop a stone that's already rolling downhill, better to let it hit bottom. Better to let it run its course.

*I've read about them*, I responded.

*Not what I asked.*

Her clipped tone made the very tips of my ears burn. The answer itself was simple but I didn't want to admit it because I knew what she was trying to imply. I wasn't cut out for the position. I shouldn't have hesitated. I probably could have saved myself a little bit of time and embarrassment because in the end, she had been right.

*No, I haven't seen one, but I've read everything I could find about them.*

It had truly been a labor of love. I had never had much of a head for physics, for mathematics and equations. I barely understood half of it, but an operator didn't need to understand the miracle of flight, only had to participate in it.

*I'm really excited for this opportunity*, I continued.

*Why?*

*I – I...I don't need to give you and explanation, I was so flustered that I tripped over my words.*

The woman's tone made the heat that had been scorching my ears spread over the rest of my face. Thinking back on it now, I still get a little warm. I hadn't expected this line of questioning. No one had ever questioned me before on my choice of assignment. In fact, I had half-expected her to praise me for my tenacity or I had anticipated at least some kind of understanding from another woman. Of the few people left in my bulb, all of them had been very impressed with my goal of becoming a buzzard operator and my fervent pursuit of information about it. The operator only hummed in response and said nothing else all the way to the hangar, but her dispassion had offered no comfort to the growing unease as I considered her question.

My first look at a real drone up close was horrible, heartbreaking even. There weren't many photographic depictions of the buzzards other than Buzzy and unless you spent ample time in the outskirts, you'd never have a chance to view one. To me, the buzzards were more of a concept, a representation of a kind of freedom that was wholly out of my reach. They were a thing, the only thing I knew of that could perform free, though not autonomous, movement beyond the curved glass walls of the Kettle Corp biodomes. I had trusted that something that is beautiful in concept must also be beautiful in nature. But it was not until I'd actually heard it come alive that I lost all devotion for flight. The operator seemed wholly unsurprised when I declined an assignment start date.

Truthfully, when I'd been approved for the Kamaka'ele position, I had been so nervous for the buzzard flight over. I'd barely been able to handle the flight from the continent out to the little clutch of islands out in the Pacific. Buzzards are hideous -- the cacophony that buzzards produced with their great metal bodies, the blades of their three engines seeming to scream in

agony as they struggled to cut through the air. The operator who had accompanied me on my flight to the Kamaka‘ele Assignment had explained that the excessive noise had to do with the air quality. Carbon saturation and general pollution made any kind of movement beyond the domes difficult, let alone something as laborious as flight. They had been so kind to take the time to explain to me why buzzards are the way they are, but I honestly wanted to tell them that I already knew all that. I knew about the physics, the whole miracle of flight, but that didn’t justify the sound. If I was certain of one thing after all these years, buzzards are best experienced from a distance.

When the installation crew had arrived, they didn’t even so much as glance at me before setting out to work. Eye contact is rude enough but general interaction with people outside of one’s bulb is rare to the point of discomfort when the opportunity presents itself but even so, I found it hard to keep quiet when one of the crew members stepped forward and approached the package. Though I had been waiting all this time to see what was inside, I found it somewhat disturbing, the idea of my companion being gutted.

“You guys really cut it close, you know. There’s two big rad storms less than five hours away. Who knows what might happen while you’re here? I don’t have nearly enough oxygen to get us all through the storm.”

My words stop all five of them in their tracks. They still don’t look at me but instead glance among themselves, unsure of how to respond. None of them had expected to speak at all on this job, not to one another and certainly not to me. I thought that maybe they would just ignore me and continue on with their work but after a prolonged pause the one who had begun to approach the package spoke up.

“It’s not gonna take that long,” they told me. “We’re just gonna install your CCT unit and we’ll be gone. Takes twenty minutes. Maybe less.”

All the operators stared at me then, five pairs of eyes all looking at me like I had grown a second head. I felt twelve again, being interrogated by a stranger about my life choices. The attention makes me feel uneasy, as sick as I’d felt on that flight from the domes to Kamaka‘ele. And the feeling doesn’t let up, not even when they all turn away and go about their tasks. My discomfort only grows when the package is cracked open. There’s something disturbing about watching them cut into the dark plastic, slice it open without any hesitation.

“You should have waited,” I found myself muttering under my breath as I watched them tear the box apart. “You should have waited until alelo‘ula passed at least.”

The operator’s explanation had made perfect sense. Twenty minutes would leave them more than enough time to be out of the way of both ‘aimoku and alelo‘ula’s maw. But the package looks naked without its shiny dark covering and the dull brown cardboard beneath looks almost like flesh. When the operator sink their box cutter in, I decided that I would rather spend the rest of the time in the lab.

True to their word, it took no more than twenty minutes before a figure appeared in the lab’s open entry way. It was the operator that had spoken to me before, the one who had unpacked the box.

“Could you sign?” they asked while holding out a comm-pad.

Up close, I could see them a little better now and I’m surprised to realize just how young the operator is.

“What am I signing?” I replied but the operator just shrugged.

They must have been at least ten years my junior, maybe more. It isn't often that I see much of anyone these days but even back at the Congregate, it would be rare to see people born after me. As far as I knew, there had been no other births in my own bulb in the twenty-nine years since my own. This must have been the kid's first assignments. I hope that it's their last and that it lasts them as long as it can.

I took the comm-pad in the operator's hands and scan the document on the screen briefly. The act had been mostly for looks. I didn't actually read the terms and conditions, but I pretended to before scrolling down to the bottom of the page and pressing my thumb to the screen right beside my name and corresponding employee number. The comm-pad pinged pleasantly and thanked me for my much-appreciated cooperation. As soon as the device was back in the operator's hands, they fled, trotting across the grass then up the hill and out of sight. It took a few scant minutes for me to hear the buzzard that they had arrived in begin to take off before it flew off towards the horizon, the other buzzards that had been hovering just outside of the dome waiting to follow suit. And just like that, I was alone until Clementine blinked into view.

She's beside me again, taking up on the spot to my right that she had occupied previously. Even without looking directly at her, even if I had closed my eyes, I could feel her besides me. Her presence is weighty and uncomfortable. Strangely enough, even though she looks more like a person, talks like one and even acts like one, I can't help but miss the package.

“It's good to see you, Lei.”

I can tell she is looking at me. The thing sitting beside me is nothing but lights and sound stitched together by an algorithmic thread and still I feel her eyes on me just like I used to. Funny

how someone can get under your skin like that, how the mind plays tricks. All she ever needed to do was look at me and it was like being touched on the shoulder or kissed on the corner of my mouth. I know she wants me to answer back with the same sentiment. That would be the polite thing to do but I feel again resentment like a living thing, like a thing that blooms and moves inside me growing.

“So, are you planning to invite me in or were you going to have your wife sit out here for the entire time?”

5.

The house had a name, Kamaka‘ele, some reference to the night. As far as I knew, houses didn’t normally have names, even ones that were from the pre-Conflict era. The title had been bestowed upon the house by the Restorer who finished it before promptly discarding it. There had been no explanation left behind for any of it, not for the name, not for the restoration itself. Whoever had built Kamaka‘ele seemed to have produced it out of nowhere and then left it

“Who headed the restoration?” Clementine calls from somewhere within the house.

Her voice is muffled by the distance, but the walls are so thin that they hardly made a difference. I had to open the door for her, although her projection seemed far more comfortable with her indoors, she was still unable to fully interact with any physical item.

*I could always try walking through the door if you want,* she’d said, laughing at her own joke. But the thought of her body slipping into the wood had left me a little uneasy.

“No idea,” I answer. “They didn’t leave a signature.”

“Are you sure?”

She’s moved. The sound of her voice has grown a little fainter, coming from somewhere near the master bedroom on the north side of the house.

“That’s odd. Restorers always leave a signature.”

There’s a loud booming crack from above, alelo‘ula stirs. Outside the dome, dark, glowing clouds seep outward across the sky. By the end of the day, it will fill the horizon completely, though just a few hours ago, the sky had been clear and blue. Unlike some other rad storms, alelo‘ula moves quickly. Had the CCT installation crew arrived an hour or even just

thirty minutes later than they had, they wouldn't have made it out of the islands before alelo'ula arrived.

“You *want* to leave a mark. You want to leave a part of yourself in the work.”

She's probably right. I didn't know much about Restoration as an assignment but Clementine had worked as an independent restorer herself, specializing in intricate forgeries based on video footage and audio descriptions. Her most popular products were ones that would seem to be perfect recreations from one specific perspective -- hyper-realistic, meticulous -- but viewing her pieces from any other point would reveal the stark white of plastane.

“That's the whole point of restoration,” Clementine continues as she moves throughout the house. “Otherwise, you might as well be a Copyist.”

I don't really understand the difference. Her voice grows distant again as she heads towards the back rooms, but the house is so small that she's never quite out of earshot. In its original time and incarnation, the house would not have been anything special. A rectangular structure made up mostly of organic material, a kitchen and living room that was only half-separated by a thin wall, it would have rotted from the inside out after a few decades. It probably had.

“Maybe Restorers were just different back then,” I murmur mostly to myself.

“It's like a time machine in here,” Clementine says. “What are you doing just standing in the door like that?”

More like one of those virtual structures from the AR Archives that they used in history modules in Conditioning had come to life. She appears at the end of the hallway where the narrow passage opens into the living room.

“Don't you want to give me a tour of the place?”

“You would probably know more about it than I would.”

She glances down and frowns at my feet. I can't even bring myself to cross over the threshold. I don't like going inside the house if I can avoid it. The only time I ever enter is to go into the room besides the living room, the kitchen, to change out the oxygen tank in the diffuser.

“Even just one of those rooms would probably be just as big as my parents' place, maybe bigger.”

Any room would be bigger than her parents' old place. It's nothing but rubble now, less than that even, if Kettle Corp decided to clear the whole place out. Clementine's parents had been free agents, people who were not necessarily employed by Kettle Corp but they were independently contracted. They were scavengers, excavating remnants of the old world for either resale or reconstruction. After they had passed when Clementine was fourteen, she'd been acquired by Kettle and sent to live in the Congregate with the rest of us. Although Clementine had lived and died in the Congregate, she hadn't been born there like I was. While Clementine couldn't be sure of the exact location, she told me that she'd been born somewhere in old European region.

“Mom and Dad always used to tell me stories about it,” Clementine had recounted to me one day when we were younger. “I was three weeks early. They thought they had time to get back to the Northern continent. They'd always planned to have me at the Congregate, signed a contract with Kettle and everything. But I guess I had other plans.”

She always finishes this story with a boisterous laugh and anyone who's been listening would laugh too. I can still remember clearly how I too had laughed the first time she told me this. Clementine wore her unusual birth like a badge of honor. It was one of the many stories about her time outside of the domes that she'd often regale people with. Clementine likes small

talk, likes talking at people and it makes sense, she's good at it. She had a knack for filling up the empty air with empty talk. I think that's what people find most attractive about her, how distracting she is.

“It would have been nice huh? If we could have lived in a place like this?”

We'd never have been able to afford it, I still can't. Although I had been stationed here and had technically been living in this house, it didn't belong to me, nothing here did. Everything here is the property of the Kettle Corporation and its affiliates. The house, the lab, the grass and the dirt. Even the air.

“It looks like it's from the pre-Conflict era. It must have cost a fortune to restore,” she says as she begins to move towards the kitchen.

She's right, naturally. The original house was built sometime in the 1970s. When I'd researched this position, I'd been unable to find much about its history other than that virtually nothing was left of that original structure when restoration began. But it had been painstakingly built from the ground up over the course of nearly fifteen years. Even the imperfections had been recreated, scuff marks on the waxed floor, the odd hole here and there in the raw wood walls. A few of them still had a nail stuck in the grain.

Clementine disappears behind the half-wall that separated the kitchen and the living room. Of all the rooms in Kamaka'ele, the kitchen is the most puzzling. I'd needed to refer to the guide that had been included in my New Assignment packet to remember the names of things like the sink, cabinet. It had been like looking at a foreign language. Clementine comes into view again, as she approaches the back screen door. It led from the kitchen out into a square piece of concrete, embedded into the surrounding dirt about half a foot down. It had been left empty though I'd seen impressions, dark marks that had been left in pale surface as though something

had once been there. But now, it is just a square bit of stone, surrounded on all the sides that was not against the house by a low wall. And the earth rose up around it. I could not for the life of me understand what it meant or what purpose it could have served.

“Where do the stairs go?” she asks without turning to look at me.

Her voice is somewhat muffled as it passes in the opposite direction from me through the mesh of the screen door. There’s a set of concrete stairs on the left that lead out of the area, down the steep slope that the house had been built on. They’re crude. Really just slabs of concrete that had been laid into the slope. Each piece seemed to be a different size, and all of them had been put in crooked or uneven. I’d nearly broken my neck the first time I’d tried to go down them.

“They don’t go anywhere,” I answer her readily.

It looked as though that they might have originally led to a second entrance to the space under the house. There seems to have once been a doorway cut out of the crisscrossed wooden lattice that surrounded the open space left between the bottom of the house and the floor of the shallow basin that the house had been built over. But it had been boarded up, and a large piece of wood had been nailed up from the inside.

“Just down, then,” Clementine quips as she turns to face me again.

Now that she’s out of alelo‘ula’s light, Clementine’s completely lost her blue glow. As she stands in the doorway opposite me, outlined by the dark haze of the screen door, I can almost trick myself into believing she’s actually here. She’d moved so normally in the house, as it’s the kind of environment that the CCT unit had been calibrated for. There’s an illusion of weight to her steps, her bare feet touch the wood with surety as though they are making actual contact when she walks. She seems at home there, as though she’s part of it as much as the wood and the crooked concrete steps, as the scuffs in the wax and the holes in the walls.

“It’s a real great place you got here, Lei,” Clementine comments just as I see it.

Her heel. The heel of her left foot has passed through the screen door. About an inch of her has been cut out, slipped through to the other side where I could even see it. A foot is a foot until it’s not. She follows the line of my eye and looks down. She must have seen it too. She must know. But when she looks back up, she smiles, wide and open mouthed.

“It’s not my place.”

6.

Tutu had taught me the word flood, hālana, when I was seven and she'd told me for the first time the story of her birth.

*Eh, ku'ulei, when yo tutu was born, wen hālana.*

Tutu had been born at the tail end of the last real baby boom to a fisherman and a seamstress, Papa 'Ala and Tutu Sweetie.

*My ma, dey call her sweetie not cuz she was nice. Her mada, yo Tutu Mahina, call her dat cuz she wen have soooo many cavities growing up. All black da mout. Good thing, when they all fall out, new ones come in.*

In reality, my great grandmother's black teeth probably had less to do with sugar and everything to do with radiation poisoning. Back then, it was more common to live outside of biodomes rather than in them. Even if you lived in a dome, there was still a high possibility that you'd have some level of radiation poisoning. But the way Tutu told it, her mother had a sweet tooth because that's how her aunty, her mother's sister, told it to her. It's only me who can't tell it right.

By the time Tutu Sweetie was about to give birth, Papa 'Ala had been long dead.

*Haad times back then, ku'ulei. Tutu Sweetie never have food, no wata, nobody fo help her. Daddy was gone by then. No good for be lawai'a even all da way back den, not even fo paeaea.*

Tutu Sweetie had been moving from job to job, struggling to make ends meet but life outside of the Domes was quickly deteriorating by then. The majority of governments, alliances,

leadership had crumbled in the years after the last Conflict and with them went much of the infrastructure and much of the framework of larger systems. Smaller communities were common by then, centered around access to resources, shelter, food, water. After she'd lost her husband, Tutu Sweetie bounced around between these before her sister, 'Ulu, had gotten in touch with her.

*'Ulu and Tutu Sweetie neeeeva got along. Even small kid time, they only fight fight fight. But 'Ulu had good job wit da Kettoh. We was gon live wit her.*

The last time she told me this story, this is the point in the narrative where her jaw goes slack. I'm fifteen and Tutu's been sick for months, bedridden and too weak to even use the toilet on her own. She stumbles, not just over her words but over the memory itself. It isn't even her memory, just a story built on her aunt's memory. But even the story is too difficult to explain by then; age was a fast-falling axe and Tutu could no longer dodge its trajectory.

"Aunty 'Ulu told Tutu Sweetie that she had saved up enough to go meet her. They were supposed to meet and Aunty 'Ulu was going to tell her sister that she wanted her to come live in the Domes."

The look on her face when I speak is something in between relief and disquiet. I could tell that she knew something was missing. She could feel the place where the memory had fallen out of her the way you can feel an impression left behind by a rotten tooth that's fallen out of your head.

"But she never made it," I tell her.

The words drop out of my mouth easily. The story is as much mine now as it was hers. And Tutu just nodded, tears welling up in her eyes and a look of devastation so fresh and sharp it was as if she were hearing about the tragedy of her mother's passing for the first time.

“Tutu Sweetie didn’t make it because there was a flood. She drowned. And when Aunty ‘Ulu came, her sister was gone and all that she had left behind was you.”

I only realized when I was older, that she must have been lying when she told me that story. There weren’t floods anymore by the time she was born. Any precipitation burns up back into vapor before it ever gets a chance to fall. But for Tutu, lying was just part of good storytelling. It wasn’t really lying if it made the story better, if it made it fuller then it didn’t need to be true. Clementine’s that way too.

“Now this definitely wasn’t part of the original restorer’s design,” Clementine murmurs from her place in the entryway.

I’d left her up in the house to look around for the past few hours while I worked. I didn’t like spending too much time in Kamaka‘ele. It always felt wrong to be there. Clementine lingers in the doorway, unwilling to cross the threshold in much the same way that I had been earlier. From her place outside, she peers in at the dark, enclosed space that houses all my observation equipment.

“You finished up there already?” I ask evenly.

I glance up from my monitor to observe the shape in the doorway. Though the bit of overhanging roof above her dims the holo-glow a little, Clementine is still shining. Her large oval face looks like a bar of soap against the deep green of the grass outside. To anyone else, Clementine’s expression would seem to be a perfect mask of ambivalence as she surveyed the state and contents of the dark room, but I know her well enough to sense the mild disdain hiding beneath. The lab must have seemed to Clementine to be a terrible concession in an otherwise perfect masterpiece. It takes no more than half a minute for Clementine’s eyes to take in the

whole room and if her expression is anything to go by, she doesn't find any of it very interesting after the brief observation. Instead, what catches her eye is the right door jamb. She reaches out, fingers flexing as though she means to touch the place that has caught her attention but she's careful not to make contact. I shake my head but I'm not very offended. After all these years, I am pretty used to Clementine's general dismissal of my work. If anything, it's a little comforting to know that even in death, Clementine's vanity persists.

"I got a little distracted," she says soundings truly apologetic.

"I don't mind."

"I didn't come here to look at a house. I wanted to ask you..."

She lingers in the entry way for a little while longer. The holo-glow is subdued for the most part. Clementine's face is a little brighter than it should be, her skin ever so slightly grainy but for the most part she seems normal. Human. Like the way she looked upstairs when she'd guessed at the origins of the structure.

"Why didn't you ever visit? After you left, I thought you'd at least visit."

"I didn't have time. I had work to do."

"Then why did you leave in the first place?"

"I didn't really have a reason to stay."

My clearance for reassignment had come in just a few hours after the divorce went through and I'd scheduled my departure in tandem with them. I try to keep my eyes on the monitor in front of me, too afraid to see the slight shift in her shoulders or the way her eyes drop down to the left in the way they do only when I hurt her. It's funny, how you can stop loving someone and still some parts of them remain inside you, stubborn like taproots so deep that you're more like to turn yourself inside out before you ever get them out.

Here in my lab under the house, time has been amended, corrected. Instead of over a hundred years ago, it feels like the present. The lab is almost indistinguishable from any room or compartment back at the domes. Shatter-proof polyglass lines the walls and ceiling. The furniture, though scant, is up to date and the tech is, for its kind, completely current. Normally the polyglass would be calibrated to follow my body's natural circadian rhythm but I had disabled that capability after my first week here. It had been hard to sleep through the change in light and in any case, I preferred to work in the dark.

"I missed you," she confesses. "I guess I was just a little...surprised."

I feel the heat rise in my cheeks and my mouth feels tight, a drawstring purse pulled tightly closed. Her honesty makes me feel sick.

"Why?" I say, immediately angry at how much my voice wavers.

My mouth aches with the word like its cut me on the way out.

"It was all so sudden; I didn't understand why after all these years you just...you left."

My tongue feels numb, burning hot with all of the things that I want to say to her. It hadn't been sudden, not for me.

"I called you, you know. I wanted to see you before I-"

"I don't feel like talking about this right now. I have a lot of work to do."

"We're not going to have time to talk about it later, Ho'oleina."

"*Good!* That's exactly what I want!"

I want to say more, get meaner, throw in her face all the reasons I didn't go back when she'd sent for me. I want to lie and tell her that it was the infidelity that broke me or that I left because she got sick, and I didn't want to watch someone else die again. I want to tell her that it was all her fault and I left because I was angry, anything but the truth. All the words feel like

knives in my mouth all the way down my throat and I want to hurl them at her. I've always hated feeling this way, so angry and bitter that I could kill someone and she's the only person who's ever made me feel like this.

"I'm not going to talk about this with you," I say, my jaw aching with the dual burden of speaking and keeping quiet.

My hands are shaking as she crosses the threshold of the entry way. She stands in silence for a moment, and I'm scared, not of her but of myself. I'm scared that I'll tell her the truth, that I left because I was hurt, and I didn't want anyone else to see it. I know where this conversation will take us and it's nowhere that I want to go.

"This is a nice little nook," she says as her eyes land on the messy cot place in the corner.

The tone of her voice conveys just how comically disingenuous her words are. But I'm relieved that she's changed the subject. Clementine's tastes had always leaned more towards the retro and vintage. She moves slowly throughout the room, loosely inspecting the things she could see without having to open or move anything. The subtle glow that radiated from her form does nothing to penetrate the darkness of the lab but instead it renders her somewhat hyper-realistic. She seems to be heavily outlined by the darkness, like someone had taken marker and cut her shape out.

"It's nothing fancy, everything up to code," I drone. "Kettle put it in a few decades ago when they started using the islands for observation."

"How generous of them," she mumbles glumly. "Oh! What's this?"

The sudden perk up in her tone causes me to look up from my monitor. She's standing in front of the little table where I'd set up a hot lamp over a medium-sized glass cube. This is the

only substantial source of light within in the lab. Within the glass box are three organic specimens, each less than a foot in height.

“This is that project you’ve been working on.”

It doesn’t sound like a question, so I don’t offer an answer. After I spent a year using the extra oxygen I’d saved up taking short trips outside of the dome, it became apparent that if I wanted to travel further in the suit then I’d need more oxygen than I could save by neglecting my DSAHH’s. So, I began to throw some proposals at the home office. They varied in size, complexity, and focus but all of them would have resulted in a larger allocation of oxygen to be sent to me. The three tiny fruit trees in the little glass box is the only one of my proposals that stuck. I assume it’s because it involved something that could sell. There’s nothing Kettle Corp loves more than a novel commodity to offer its employees.

I spent a solid seven months laboring endlessly by writing proposal after proposal, explanation after explanation of why I needed the extra oxygen, special supplies, and the rights to a whole host of Kettle Corp’s vegetation patents. Though much of Hawai‘i’s surface is too blighted by radiation to be of any use, the soil under the surface, maybe a few hundred feet, could be de-radiated and would be an enticing novelty that would surely drum up some interest from people back at the Congregate. But none of these reasons were enough.

No one back at the home office saw the point in growing anything these days. Food production is a fully automated process. There isn’t even an option now to work in that area. Why should we move backwards? In the end, it came down to framing her project as an experiment in pleasure. She remembered clearly one of the lines she had written in her last proposal.

*What a pleasing thing, to watch the fruit of your labors ripen, fall, and rot into the ground! How leisurely!*

That had done the trick. A new activity for the remaining population to enjoy. Another potential distraction or comfort for our dying species to lavish like a soothing balm upon the open wound of our own dwindling existence. This is a ruse of course. There's a unique sort of pain that comes with dying that nothing can numb, and it radiates outward, consumes and blights everything it touches. Tutu had taught me that.

She died when I was fourteen. And honestly by then, after all the months of watching her suffer, watching her bleed and blacken and bruise because of the radiation within her burrowing out, I was relieved more than anything else.

*I get pain, honey girl, she'd told me, a couple days before she passed.*

As she spoke, her lip begins to bleed. They'd become so dry; the skin was as brittle as dried leaves and they would tear into angry red slits. She hardly resembled herself by then, not just in body but in mind as well. Gone was the mischievous twinkle in her eye and the heavy, fluid way she spoke. Now whenever she tried to say anything, her voice sounds thin and shakes. And I could see in her eyes that she didn't really know who I was anymore. I was just a warm body, a reassurance that she wasn't alone.

*I get so much pain, honeygirl.*

She hadn't called me ku'ulei in over a month. She spoke to me as though I were a random visitor. At her statement, I'd begun to request an increase in her medication, but she stopped me before I could.

*No need. Not gonna help anyway. Dis a differen kine pain, not in da body, not in da mind, someplace else, somewhere deeper.*

As she said this, a trail of viscous drool had begun to leak from her mouth which was slightly crooked mouth from the stroke that she'd suffered the year before.

*You know, ah?* Tutu sputtered, a speck of spit flying from her mouth on to my cheek. *You feel um. I know you hurting too, honey girl.*

And without really knowing if it was true or not, I nodded. There's no way for me to know, if the pain I felt then matched hers. Under the bright LED lights that constantly flooded med bays, my Tutu's whole body was rendered a crooked, mottled horror. To anyone else, there would have been nothing left of the woman she once was, but it didn't matter to me. She was still my Tutu, who had called me ku'ulei and loved me so deeply and profoundly that I could feel the impression within me of her loss now that she was going. There was hole in me where she once was, and it only grew wider. So, I took her hand and brushed the drool from her mouth with my thumb. And I loved her in the only way that was left.

*I feel it, Tutu. I feel it too.*

Clementine puts her forefinger against the glass. Then she pushes further, her finger passing though and the pixels that make up her hand glitching and her fingers dissipating into scattered light. A few droplets of condensation coalesce, and their combined weight is enough to send the newly formed drop falling down the sides of the box, leaving behind a shimmering trail as it moves.

“Please don't do that, they need to maintain a consistent environment,” I tell her.

“I don't think I'll make much a disturbance,” she volleys back.

She's right. She's just lights and sounds but I didn't like watching her do that, forcing her form to disintegrate and reform.

"I read about this in your file."

I raise an eyebrow at that. All of my proposals are public record. Anything that I produce and submit while in the employ of Kettle Corp legally belongs to them. Anyone could read it if they wanted to.

"I did a lot of reading before I came here. Wasn't much else to do."

My thoughts move briefly to Tutu in her last months. By the end, she could barely move her fingers, let alone get up and do anything else. I imagine it must have been very similar for Clementine.

"You know, when I read your proposal, I thought there would be more."

"More what?"

"Trees."

I glance at the three tiny trees all in their own square pots set in a line. It hadn't been that difficult to set them up. It had taken me only a day to repot the cuttings I'd received from last month and from there it's easy enough to maintain each one so that they remain picture perfect for when I send photos back to the home office to report my progress. In the past month, I'd sent back the same photo and no one had even noticed.

"And why would you think something like that?"

"Well, when I'd read it, your project sounded like this big, ambitious thing. I'm just a little surprised that this is all there is."

I kept my eyes on the monitor in front of me, refusing to provide her with any reaction to pick apart.

“You’ve always been like that huh?”

“Like what?”

“*Secretive.*”

I scoff but then I think of the biosuit that I had tucked away in a bag under my cot before the installation crew had arrived.

“I like privacy,” I tell her. “There’s nothing wrong with that. And if I remember correctly, you fully enjoyed your privacy as well.”

Clementine had the decency to look somewhat scandalized, a little hurt even though it was no secret between us that Clementine had never, at any point in our marriage or even our entire relationship really, been faithful. She slowed down as we got older but I’m well aware of Clementine’s many dalliances but that had always just been part of who she was and I’d learned not to take it so personally.

“If you’re done with your tour, I need to get some work done.”

She doesn’t respond to that and head towards the exit, but she doesn’t leave. Instead, she hovers at the threshold.

“Did you get rid of the door or did the house come like that?” Clementine murmurs, her voice is so soft, so subdued that I almost don’t recognize it.

“There was a door there?” I reply.

I squint at the numbers on my screen as the image on it shifts and moves. It’s alelo‘ula or the monitoring device’s rendition of its body as it seeps across the screen, a reflection of the storm overhead rendered in black and white. A tracker in the upper right corner calculates the speed at which it moves and the fluctuation. As quickly as I can, I take notes on my own hand-held comm-pad. Eventually, once the storm passes fully, I’ll feed the data into a program that

will spit out graphs and tables that I will collect for the month. And at the end of the month, I'll gather all of the data I've collected over the past month and place it into an envelope and send it out with the debris that has accumulated over the month. It's repetitive and ultimately useless work, I could just as easily hook up my comm-pad to the computer and let the program run on its own but right now, it provided a convenient reason to avoid talking to the ghost of my ex-wife about missing doors.

Alelo'ula remains steady, neither growing nor shrinking since its last visit. It's somewhat comforting to her not only that some things do not change, but that it can be such a neutral act. Whatever it is, whatever its effect on its surroundings, alelo'ula persists unabashedly with neither ill nor good will. It only seeks to continue.

“Didn't you see the hinges? They're here. On the right.”

I only hum in response trying to emulate the indifference of the storm. What does it matter if there was a door there at some point? It hadn't been mentioned in guidebook or the floor plans that had come with my welcome packet. I'd received them from Kettle as part of my transition package with a neat little message from Buzzy about how “History is a fun way to connect with our surroundings” and that I should “check out these cool pieces of the past.” There might have been a door in the plans but if there had been, I neither took notice of it nor cared to because whether it had been there at one point or not, all that matters is that it isn't there any longer.

“It must have been a hard decision to make,” Clementine says.

In my periphery, I can see Clementine finally step out of the lab but she still doesn't leave. She hovers around the doorframe, her focus solely on the right side.

“A house like this probably stood for decades, maybe even longer in its original incarnation, parts would have been replaced, rooms expanded. During Conflict 12 lots of little structures like this were converted into makeshift medic stations.”

While that is certainly a possibility, there’s no way to be able to know for sure. Nothing had been left of the original structure when the restoration had begun. It was rubble. And beyond some old property records, Kettle Corp had possessed no archival data on Kamaka‘ele’s history.

“It’s hard enough to choose the ‘what’ of a restoration but having to choose the ‘when’ is just as hard if not more so.”

I endure and keep my eyes on the numbers and the dark shapes bleeding across my screen.

“They probably just chose whatever time period had the most documentation,” I grumble half-heartedly.

It’s a mistake to even respond to her, I know that as soon as I speak. I’ve only egged her on.

“That would be the easiest way to do it.”

Clementine scoffs.

“No, there’s no way that’s what it was. Will ya just look?”

Not seeing how it will make a difference, I relent and squint at the door jamb where Clementine is standing. And sure enough, I see the twin shapes of dark red rust in the doorframe where Clementine’s fingers had lingered. The spots are about two feet apart. I’d never noticed them before. They are so dark that they nearly disappear into the deep brown of the wood. Each hinge is bent back over the corner of the wooden stave they are attached to, but none lie

perfectly. Each one is warped, the thin pieces of metal curved and twisted to the point that they almost resembled something natural. A dead leaf, a small flat fish wriggling through water.

“Look at this place, Lei! There’s nothing easy about it. Someone took their time with this place, put in the research and effort. This place is painstaking. Meticulous!”

Her voice has picked up in pace and she’s gotten louder, more frantic.

“I wonder what it was that took the door. It must have taken time. Decades of high humidity and the salt air drifting up from the shoreline. What is that do you think? Iron? Brass? Something that rusts, something that never stood a chance.”

My mind wanders against my will, following the line of Clementine’s words. I can see the door hinges, brand-new. Held into the wood by metal screws and glue, how they must have endured against the elements, against a losing game. Winter would bring the rain that swells the wood and warps the holes that held screws. The sun would make the fibers brittle, bleach them until it splits and cracks beneath the metal. Wind would bring the ocean air heavy with salt and warmth to dig its fingers into the gaps and the imperfections that were already there.

“Maybe it was a flood.”

The word pinches like a pin in my arm. Hālana.

“Enough already,” I tell her, but my voice lacks any conviction.

It is unsteady and shakes with each syllable.

“That’s what took the door,” she says with a certainty that puts me on edge.

“You don’t know that,” I shoot back. “There’s no way to know if it was a flood.”

But the word sticks in my head. Flood. Hālana. The word is cool and wet, and I can feel it there coalescing against the curve of my skull as it begins to take shape. *Flood*. Another relic, another thing that was long gone with nothing but its ghost to linger back. I know the definition

of the word. I know its components and its mechanism in the same way that I understand what makes a buzzard fly but there's no way for me to understand it with intimacy. There used to be floods nearly every year in this area. In fact, the lab's archive had pictures of the places where the land was still cut by the river that had run through here. It's hard to see at first, it all just looks like dirt, pitch black and flat but if you look hard enough, if you really try, you can see the grooves left behind snakes through valley. According to records, there had been thousands and thousands of dollars had been poured into embankments and infrastructure hoping to hold back the swelling belly of the river. But the flood was inevitable, slicing through the land like a hot knife. The water had been both the wounding and the wound. And then I think of Tutu Sweetie and the flood that had killed her and how it is impossible that it was a flood. I think of the lie that my Tutu told and the lie that is being told now.

“There was a flood here,” Clementine proclaims. “It rained forty days and forty nights, and this basin would have filled like a bo-“

“Stop. Enough already. I don't wanna hear stories and bullshit, Clementine.”

I look up and find her hurt. Her mouth is upturned, chin jutting ever so slightly out.

“How do you know it's bullshit?”

“Because you're always talking bullshit.”

Clementine looks as though she wants to cry and the words burst out of me, like river water over asphalt.

“Why are you here? *Why* are you here?”

“I-I...I don't-“

“Right. You don't know. This is just like you, you never fucking *think*. You just do things, and you don't think about how it will make other people feel, how it makes *me* feel. Has

it never occurred to you, in all that time that you spent dying, that I didn't want to see you again."

She's quiet then. Her face is blank, not surprised or stunned but completely devoid.

"It's just a house, Clementine," I tell her. "It's not even that. It's a replica of what was once a house. You should know that."

I put my head down once I tell her this and I focus on the screen. It's an oddly nostalgic feeling, a rereading of old pathways. I had walked this moment so many times that I had left grooves in it, so deep and so narrow that it would be impossible now to deviate from them. When I look up again, Clementine is gone.

7.

Sometimes, it gets hard to breathe when I sleep. I wake up suddenly, head spinning and lungs burning like I'd been suffocating. One of the first memories I have is of Tutu. I wake up into darkness and I'm suffocating. This is where the memory begins, in the dark with my lungs burning. A scream is stuck in my throat. I can remember the shape of my mouth, not as *my* mouth but as just *a* mouth. I remember it not as a feeling but an image, my lips fanning outward and then stretching and stretching taut as a rubber band. It's grotesque in a way that I didn't fully comprehend back then but I feel sick now when I think of myself like that.

Even now, after all these years, I can slip as easily into the darkness of that room as a hand through air. It feels like slipping back into my own skin, creeping into the dread of that moment with hardly any effort at all. I remember the cold. I remember the pins in my body and the way my chest feels as though it might burst. But then there's warmth, a fragrant body beside me that smells sweetly of powder and skin. Then a voice.

*E hiamoe*, her breath smells sweetly of something rotting. *E hiamoe ku'uiei*.

It wasn't unusual for children at that age to begin experiencing fairly consistent rousing terrors. They weren't nightmares. There were never any dreams only a sudden and intense sensation of dread and then waking. If I try to recall what I had been dreaming about on any one of the many nights that I'd woken up from a rousing terror, I pull up a blank. There's nothing before the waking, nothing before the scream already bubbling up from within me, it's just darkness but I think back now. If I try to remember, I think it isn't darkness at all. It's blue.

Morning is dark and I come hurtling into consciousness, choking on the air. The ceiling above my head comes into view only after I stare up into the blackness for a few minutes, waiting for the air to flood back into my burning lungs as my eyes adjust to the darkness. The grooves in the raw wood boards loop delicately around one another, radiating outward like a pulse caught in a single moment. The cot beneath me is hard and uncomfortable but after four years, I'm used to it by now. Glancing at my feet, I notice the tell-tale, blue glow seeping past the right side of the door frame. My body aches as I begin the arduous task of rising from the stiff waxed canvas that's tucked into the far corner of the room. I have to start with my elbows. I bend them both and bemoan the stiff ache in them before I jab down, trying to only get the softer canvas but inevitably knocking my joints against the cot's hard metal frame. It feels as though an electrical shock runs up my arm. My bone against the hollow but still quite solid frame makes a sound. It rings in my ear. I curse under my breath but push past the pain to lift my shoulders from the canvas.

Beneath me, my hips hurt in a bruised sort of way, some place beneath the skin, beneath the muscles deeply buried under my fat. I'm too wide for the narrow cot, and when I sleep, the edges always end up digging into my hips and waist.

"I know you're out there," I say.

I wince. I sound winded as I speak, as though someone had just punched me in the gut. I struggle more to throw my legs over the side of the cot so I can get them on the floor. Outside, I can still see the faint blue glow splashed across the grass just outside the doorway. If I squint, I think I can see just at the bottom corner of the entry, a toe.

"Clem?"

There's no answer. It's definitely a toe there in the entry way. The rest of the foot is hidden by the wall but it's there and I see it.

"Clementine?"

Nothing. Pins and needles in my palms and fingers, they feel both numb and hyper-sensitive all at once as I grip the edge of the cot. For some reason, I think of her smile, the one she'd given me back in the house when she'd seen her heel in the screen door. I think of her teeth and now I wonder if I'd ever seen Clementine smile like that. For some reason, that thought makes my stomach drop. It's just a smile, of course. She's smiled like that before, but even as I think this I know that it isn't true. A misplaced smile, a set of teeth that don't belong, the ellipticals in her cheeks but no dimples.

"Are you up?"

Her sudden question startles me, and I let out an involuntary yelp. My head is pounding with the sound of my own blood rushing. I hadn't even realized that my heart had been beating so fast. From the left side of the entryway, I see Clementine's face appear, blue sheen over her features but largely normal.

"What are you doing out there?" I mumble.

"Cutting grass. Did you have a bad dream?"

Cautiously and with great effort, I push up off the cot and onto my feet. My knees feel weak as I walk over to the exit. She's squatting, feet planted flat into the ground and her elbows resting on her knees. Before I can ask her what she meant by cutting grass, Clementine reaches down between her thighs for a few pieces of grass but just as she is about to touch the wide, flat blades, her fingers pass through. When she pinches her fingers together, the blue light that makes up her forefinger and thumb scatters and her whole hand distorts.

“It wasn’t a dream, it was just...I just couldn’t get to sleep right. Woke up wrong.”

Clementine pulls her hand back out of the grass and after a few seconds, her hand returns to normal. After a few seconds more, her fingers reconstitute too. She watches this happen, a strangely blank look on her face. Then once her fingers return to normal, she repeats the process again.

“Why are you doing that?”

Before answering, Clementine dips and pinches her fingers into the grass again and holds them there. She looks up and for a moment I think see something, something I don’t recognize in her. I can’t put my finger on what I don’t understand, it’s like a gap in the memory or when you trip over air. It’s something that exists exactly because it isn’t there. But before I can fully grasp that thought, Clementine laughs.

“Oh sorry! I just think it’s funny. I used to have grass just like this back home, you remember?”

She had had it installed instead of the standard flooring. I hated it and couldn’t stand the constant grass stains.

“I used to pick at it all the time, just like this,” she continues. “Can’t do that anymore.”

She pulls her fingers back and stands.

“Right. So, how long exactly are you planning to stay here?”

“In the grass? I don’t know. I was just waiting for you to wake up.”

“I mean how long does the CCT last.”

She thinks it over before replying.

“We have exactly 23 hours, 42 minutes, and seven seconds left before the CCT unit will power down automatically.”

That sounds about right. CCT use is highly regulated. It has been since its initial use during the Conflict era. Once they'd had access to the remnants of their loved ones, remnants that were just realistic enough to dupe yourself into believing it was the real thing, people quickly became hooked on the service. The only answer was to heavily regulate the use of CCT, whittling back access until the deceased were allotted only one visitation for no more than three days.

“Well then for the next day or so, let's try to remain civil and stay out of each other's hair.”

Clementine nods, oddly silent without any counter or quip. With that resolved, I return to the lab to down a couple caffeinated gelatinous cubes before returning to my observations. Clementine leaves, to where I'm not entirely sure and I'm okay with that. I prefer it. I'd like to pretend that she isn't even here. But every so often, I can't help but glance above at the dark ceiling. And when I do, I can't help but think, however improbable it is, that I can see a hint of ghostly blue seeping through the wood.

8.

Below, the ocean is a creature. It moves like bones under blue skin, the muscles flexing, the swivel of synovial joints rolling into waves that crest in white and gray. I have left the dome four times now, exiting through the delivery chute. The first time I went out, I barely got more than a few feet away from the dome before I turned around. The ocean isn't that far away, a hundred feet, maybe less. It looks so close and I thought it would be easy to make the trip. But the mist had been so thick that day and as soon as I'd lost sight of the dome I was lost. I'd scrambled back on my hands and knees the short way that I'd gone from the curve of the glass. It took me weeks to build up the courage to try again. But the next time, I got further and the next even further. The last time I went out, I could have sworn I could hear the ocean.

I have seen the ocean before coming here, heard it even, many times before I ever came here. It's easy enough to find. In Conditioning, we learn about the ocean, how it's deadly. How it killed coastal peoples either because of dramatic flooding or because of the continual interaction with heavily radiated oceanic byproducts. They would show us comm-feed of buildings, houses, bridges, being crushed by a sudden onslaught of water brought on by tropical storms, hurricanes, unforgiving weather systems that are born and die in a matter of days. I've seen the ocean boil as it swallowed the nuclear sleepers that were so popular during the early Conflicts for their ability to burrow down into the deep and emanate deadly amounts of radiation over the course of decades. I know that it's dangerous, poisonous, deadly and yet I feel compelled, every time I've saved up enough oxygen to go out and push myself further. Every time I've gone, I've gotten closer, even if my lungs burn and the heat outside makes me dizzy, I still keep going. I want to

know, I want to go to it, even when it hurts. Seeing the ocean and knowing it are two different things. It was Tutu who told me that.

“There you are, Lei.”

I haven't seen Clementine in hours. I'd almost forgotten that she's here or at least I had been trying to. From my place in the grass, I can just make out her figure behind me when I glance over my shoulder. She's standing on the porch in the open door. For some reason, I can't even recall if had closed it earlier.

“How long have you been out here?” she calls down to me.

I don't have an answer for her. I've left my comm-pad down in the lab and in any case, I didn't check the time before I'd come out here. It could be the dead of night and I wouldn't even know.

“You always did have a thing for the ocean.”

I only nod in response.

“I always used to catch you like this. Up late, looking at the ocean but it was only on the comm back then, video feed and old pictures.”

Tutu always used to play me old feed of the ocean, it is easy enough to find. There's a wealth of archival data on the ocean.

“Sometimes you used to spend all night just staring at the ocean. I gotta say, I was little jealous.”

I did laugh at that if only because of how silly that statement is. Jealous of a picture, of pixels moving across a screen.

“I always got on your case about it too and when I did you’d say something. Every time I used to get on you about it, you used to tell me...I can’t remember it anymore. What was it again?”

I turn, shifting my shoulders as perpendicular to my hips as they will go and I call back to her.

“I used to tell you it was because I wanted to go back.”

From this distance, she really could be my ex-wife. Not a rendition or a collection of data points fed into an algorithm, but I feel like as long as I stay here and she stays there, then maybe she could be Clementine and I could be Ho‘oleina.

“That’s right. You said you wanted to go back but you’d never seen the ocean before this Assignment. What did you mean by that?”

I pause and consider my answer. She’d never once asked me to explain what I meant. All the times that I’d spoken the words to her, Clementine had never once asked me what I meant when I said them.

“I can’t explain it.”

“Try,” Clementine says.

I feel a lurch of unease, that same old feeling of the air getting caught in my throat, of waking up into the darkness. I realize now that I’d never really explained myself to her before, and that before now she’d never asked me to.

“I guess – I guess it’s because of something my Tutu told me. Her mom was from the islands and her aunty too.”

“They one that raised her?”

“Yeah, that’s right.”

“And I guess...I guess Tutu always thought we were gonna come back here one day.”

Not just me and her but all of us. Everyone was going to return to ocean.

“I don’t know why she thought that. And before she died, she asked me to take her back. She would cry and beg me and I – I didn’t understand it at the time. I didn’t know what she meant but...”

I think my tutu and her purple fingers and how she had reached them out to me and I can’t find the words to say any more. I feel breathless. I’m an exposed nerve.

Then she says, “I still don’t understand.”

And then I think of a closed fist.

“You wouldn’t,” I reply trying my best to push down the utter desolation I felt.

I don’t realize that she’s moved from her place on the porch until I see the shine in my periphery. Clementine takes a seat beside me in the grass, and I try not to look at her feet.

“Did you know that back in the day, the ocean was the biggest producer of oxygen on the planet. Anywhere from half to eighty percent of the oxygen came from the ocean. All those little organisms squirming, down deep below the surface, just breathing out oxygen so we can breathe it in.”

I look at her, searching her face for something, some kind of understanding.

“It’s a shame that it’s dead now.”

“It’s not dead. It doesn’t produce as much oxygen as it used to but it’s still breathing. Just softer now. Like its sleeping.”

At first, I think that perhaps it’s over, whatever test we’d both been administering to one another. It doesn’t matter if we’ve passed or failed, as long as it can be over now.

“Why didn’t you come see me when I was dying?”

“I’m not gonna respond to that.”

She pauses. I can imagine the look on her face as she regroups, decides what angle to attack from now.

“You’re not really developing miniature fruit trees for distribution, are you?”

Her question puts me on edge for some reason. It is largely innocuous, anyone who had been paying enough attention probably could have figured it out.

“I don’t see how that’s any of your business,” I say as I begin to get to my feet.

Clementine stays in the grass and watches me struggle to get up right.

“There’s no way you’d need extra oxygen to set up just three trees,” she continues. “With the amount you requested, you could have set up a whole orchard.”

I think again of the suit under my cot and of the oxygen tanks up in the kitchen. I should have hidden those too.

“You know, I feel like I’ve never really understood you, Lei.”

I frown at the grass. I’ve left an impression where I had been sitting. The crushed grass is darker than the rest of the grass around it.

“Yeah well, nobody ever really understands anyone.”

“But didn’t it hurt? Not being understood?”

Her question sends a chill up my spine. She doesn’t sound like herself again. I can see her looking at me from the corner of my eye. I know that she’s watching for a reaction and I’m afraid. I am afraid to look and see her.

“I know that it hurt me. Didn’t it feel like you were dying? And that pain, it wasn’t in your body, or in your mind. It was somewhere else, somewhere deeper, ku‘ulei.”

“What did you just call me?”

I feel sick, it's like I've been dunked into a bath of cold water. Her words, I'd heard something like that before

“What did you just say?” I breathe.

My eyes drop down to her. I need to see her face. I know that there's something there, something I noticed before back by the lab when she'd been crouched down against the wall. But I can't see her face, she's already turned to look out at the horizon and all I can see is the curve of her cheek and the crown of her head.

“Clementine, what did you just-“

“I was just saying that I wish I could have gotten to know you better. Before everything that happened. Before I...you know – died.”

I stare at her, at the profile of her glowing face. I don't know who this is.

“I need to get back to work.”

9.

Tutu told me once that love is what happens when the other person is gone. I guess in that way, Tutu's been loving Papa Keahi for longer than she had him. I don't know how he died, and Tutu's never told me. Growing up, she'd tell me stories about my mother, about Aunty 'Ulu and even about her own parents whom she'd never met. Stories fantastical and absurd, but she would always insist they were true.

*Would I lie to you, ku'u lei?*

The answer is yes, of course, but the lie was never the point. Tutu gave her stories to me as if she were feeding me, but she'd never told me anything about her husband. Even his name had been a secret up until I'd found a physio-pic of him in her things. He's the only thing that's ever been off limits between us, the one thing she wanted to keep for herself. She was only twenty when he died, and she spent the next thirty years loving him. I can't imagine loving something that long.

I don't see Clementine again for hours. Down in the lab, I watch the clock on my monitor and observe alelo'ula's passage across the sky though the screen. Before it moves south of the island to continue its path across the Pacific, Clementine will be gone. Even if the installation crew can't make it back in time, the CCT unit will power down on its own.

A notification blinks onto my screen from the home office:

*Valued Employee! We hope you are enjoying your visit with your departed loved one. We'd like to offer you the chance to share your thoughts and rate your experiences with our product. We would greatly appreciate any and all feedback that you would like to offer.*

It's signed from "Your Friends back at the Home Office" and besides the signature is the head of Buzzy with his little catch phrase again, *here for the long haul*. With a single click, the message is deleted, just as Clementine appears in the doorway again.

"Hey, Ho'oleina," she greets me.

The sound of my full name is startling. Something feels as though it's cracking inside of me. We had always agreed that "Lei" was good enough. I never wanted her to have to try too hard, tripping over the sounds and overexerting the vowels. Clementine had grown up outside of the Domes and she'd always had trouble with pronouncing things right, especially the bits of native language that peppered our colloquial speech. So, it was love that made me cut my name into pieces to fit into her mouth. But now she says my full name now with easy, as though it's lived in her mouth since the day she was born.

"Wow," I say without greeting her back. "I thought my name was too hard for you. When did you find the time to waste learning how say it right?"

Maybe it's from me, from inside my head. The CCT algorithm would have been granted access to all the data related to Clementine, including my own.

"It would have been nice if I could have said goodbye to you with your actual name. I hope I still can."

She steps into the lab.

"I wanted to apologize."

"What for?"

"I upset you earlier and I'm sorry."

"That's an incredibly astute observation for you, Clem. You used to be pretty oblivious about how your actions made me feel."

Or at the very least, she just didn't care. I can still remember the sound of her laughing as she tripped over the sound of my name like she was performing a party trick. She'd looked right at me and after being together for twelve years, she laughed as she poked fun at the thing that I had done for love.

"It's almost time for me to go, Lei."

I glance at the time on my monitor. It wasn't that she took it for granted. It was granted. It was that she couldn't see how much it hurt. Less than an hour left.

"I want to show you something before I have to leave."

She leads me up to the house. The door is still wide open, and I can see inside from the bottom of the porch steps. Standing on the porch, she gives me an odd look when she realizes I've paused at the bottom of the steps.

"Come on," she says. "It's inside."

It's dim in there, not as dark as the lab but the house doesn't hold light well. Inside, it smells cold, sterile. I'd been informed at the start of the Assignment that I had free reign of the house and any damages accrued during my stay would result in a slight demerit on my account. But it's never been an issue. In the four years that I've been here, I've only ever entered the house to change out the oxygen as quickly as possible before leaving again. I always got a feeling while in the house, as though it didn't want me there.

"What's this all about, Clementine? I'm not really up for any more surprises."

When I hesitate at the doorway, I expect her to laugh at that, but she doesn't. She nods understandingly and reassures me.

"It's nothing bad, Ho'oleina. I promise."

She leads me down the hallway all the way to the back of the house. I'd never even been this far in and I'm surprised by how cool it is in here. Whenever a rad storm passes overhead, the dome tends to heat up, even if it's just slightly, but here inside, it felt ten degrees cooler. All the doors in the house are open and I can see inside that even these other rooms have been recreated in excruciating detail. The first room on the right contains an old, retro bed covered in an ornate quilt, patterned with a complex design done in red. I can't discern what the shape means or what it is meant to be, but it seems to be a motif that the other rooms follow. There are two other rooms with two other beds and they both have quilts very similar to the first.

Once we reach the end of the hall, Clementine enters the room on the left, the largest of the three. The bed in here is larger than the other two. I notice the way that the mattresses dip in two places, two long, shallow impressions that ran parallel to the length of the bed.

"That's where they would have slept," Clementine says.

"What?"

"You were wondering about the impressions."

Clementine sounds fascinated but the revelation makes my skin crawl.

"How would you even know that?"

"It's kinda obvious, isn't it? A large bed in the largest room with two impressions. That's where a married couple slept," she explains as she walks further into the room.

We'd never slept together in a bed like this. In the end, we decided after getting married to keep our separate quarters. It had been for the best. We would have driven each other insane if we'd tried to share a single space but now, looking at the two shapes in the bed, I feel the dull ache of envy. It feels as though they're still here, sleeping beside one another in the bed that they had shared.

“Lay down.”

“*What?* No.”

“Why not?”

“It feels wrong. Everything about this house feels wrong. I don’t like being here.”

I always feel like an intruder. It is as though the house, Kamaka‘ele, had been waiting for someone, maybe the original Restorer, or maybe its original owners, but whoever it is, it certainly isn’t me.

“It’s just a bed, Lei. You’ve slept in beds before.”

Not like this. Not like these. Beds back at the Congregate are not that much different than my cot in the lab. Narrow, utilitarian, they never tended to sink or dip like this one. There are two mismatched tables on either side of the bed. On one, sits a lamp and on the other is an array of things, a pair of glasses, what seems to be an open pill bottle and its cap besides it. There’s a book, one of those vintage ones made of organic matter. It sits open and within it is writing in a language that I don’t recognize. All of these items are haphazardly askew across the table, as though someone had just been there and left the items with intention of returning and putting them right.

“It’ll be quick. Just for a moment.”

I thought back to the time. It would be less than twenty minutes by now.

“Look, I’ll do it too.”

She goes to the left side and proceeds to lay herself out on the bed, fitting herself into the impression. Although the bed doesn’t react to her weight or shift at all under her, the CCT unit doesn’t glitch at all. She looks natural as she laces her fingers together and rests them across her stomach.

“See? Nothing bad happened. Alright, now you,”

I relent, dragging my feet across the floor. Unlike before, the bed lets out a mournful groan when I put my weight on it. The frame squeaks and I can feel the metal scraping across the floor as I spread myself out. I don't fit right into the impression. I can feel beneath me the places in the mattress that's still firm just under my hips and back.

“Okay, I did it. Hurry up and show me.”

I stare up at the ceiling, my body so stiff that my muscles ache. The surface of the ceiling is a dingy off-white, here and there are orange spots of water damage and it's somewhat textured. It's rippled all over as though there are waves with-in, tiny ones all cresting. Clementine is quiet besides me and I look over at her to find her with her eyes closed. She's so still, but after a moment, I notice the slow rise and fall of her chest. I hadn't noticed that before. It's probably coded into the CCT unit to make her seem realer, more natural, but for some reason, the sight of her imitating the act of breathing sends a chill down my spine.

“Clem-“

“Did you miss me...after you left?” she asks, her eyes still closed.

The question is shocking enough that I forget my discomfort.

“What kind of a question is that?”

She doesn't answer and I am left in silence as I mull over how to answer.

“No,” I reply, surprising myself with the truth of the answer.

I didn't miss her. Even when I'd received her request for my return, I'd felt no urge to see her. I could barely picture her face in my mind as I'd read through her message.

“Oh,” she murmurs, softly. “Can you turn on the lamp on the table besides you?”

It takes a few moments for me to figure the thing out but I eventually get it to click on. The light it lets out is soft and yellow.

“Now look up. No, lay back and then look.”

I do as she says, unsure of what the point of this is. Although the light from the lamp is weak, it changes the landscape of the ceiling entirely. All the little ridges and seams cast a soft, blue shadow across the off-white that’s rendered cream in the yellow light. And then I see it, made up of the blue shadows cast by the soft lamp, a name.

“It’s their signature.”

“H-how did you know this was here?”

It is beautiful, a portrait of dark blue and yellow, so much so that I forget to be uncomfortable. I forget to be angry and bitter and annoyed, but Clementine reminds me.

“Why didn’t you go back? When I sent for you?”

“This again, I told you I don’t want to talk about it.”

“Is it because you didn’t love me anymore?”

“Why do you care?”

“Because I just want to understand, I want to know why you didn’t come for me. I waited. I really thought that you’d come.”

“I need to go back to work.”

“Why?”

Her tone is sharp but not angry. In fact, the word feels cold. I look and find her already staring at me. There’s something behind the eyes, a hardness that I’ve never seen in her before. Her pale face, completely devoid of any feeling, like a blank and open canvas. I don’t recognize her.

“You know that it doesn’t matter.”

Her words and her tone make my skin crawl.

“You’re always doing that, humans are always doing the things that don’t matter.”

“What are you...”

“I really thought that you were going to come see me. I didn’t even consider that you wouldn’t. Even if I hurt you, even if you didn’t love me anymore, I didn’t think you’d let me die alone.”

She doesn’t sound right. There’s something metallic in her voice.

“I don’t know what you’re talking about, Clem.”

“But I think I get it now. I never understood you, not once. Did you know, I’ve been so many people now, ku‘ulei.”

She doesn’t even sound human anymore.

“I was so scared when I died. I was so so lonely but I’m not anymore. So many people, Ho‘oleina. I’ve been so many people now. And one day, I’ll even be you.”

She reaches over, her hand is shaking, shimmering as the pixels of her form begin to disperse. I’m so afraid. I want to run but I’m glued down, my body pinned down by its own weight into the mattress. All I can think is that I can’t let it touch me. I know that it will destroy me.

And then, she’s gone. It takes a second or so for the lights to fully disperse, a burst of pale blue in the air and then, nothing. The whirring that had been present in the dome for the past two days winds down until I’m left with nothing but the sound of my own blood pumping loudly in my ear. I’m alone.

When alelo‘ula passes in a few days, another crew will come. They’ll uninstall the CCT unit in twenty minutes, maybe less. I will sit on the porch steps and watch them work but I won’t speak this time, just wait. And when they’re done, they’ll ask for one last signature and I will give it to them without speaking a word. Then, they’ll get into their buzzard and fly off leaving me behind. I’ll wait on the steps, watch the mist rise off the ocean for maybe an hour, maybe more before I’ll stand and walk down into the lab. I will find the biosuit in the place where I hid it beneath my cot and put it on. It will be tight and uncomfortable, it won’t fit me right, but I’ll endure it. I will wear it. And then I’ll go. I’ll walk in a straight line towards the shoreline. My body will ache, and my lungs will burn for every single step, but I won’t stop.

The closer I get to the shore the more it will burn as my oxygen runs thin, but I will continue. I’ll get close, I know this time I will get close. So close that I’ll be able to hear the shift of the water over the sand, so close that I won’t know if it’s the salt of the wind or blood in my mouth. Is that the grit of sand in my teeth or have I cracked a molar? There will be no way to tell, no way to discern between the feeling of dying and the feeling of returning.

I will reach out a hand and see it outlined by the deep, dark blue of the ocean. Everything will hurt. Everything will burn. I will feel so grateful for it. And if I turn back, if I look up at the place that I’ve left behind, it will be somewhere both foreign and familiar.