

Chapter 4

waking up at Jasmines

Kat woke slowly to a small chime in the far distance. Her hands caressed the lavender sheets and she squeezed a pillow in front of her.

Confusion and pleasure permeated her first forays into consciousness. Nothing was familiar about waking up in this mess of satin, and what was that chime?

She was at Jasmine's— was the chime Jasmine's?

Startled, she realized she hadn't set an alarm, and had been in bed for god knows how long. How do I figure out what time it is? The room didn't have a clock.

How the hell does this room not have a clock?

But surely Kelsey and Jasmine would have woken her, if she slept in too long, right?

Slipping out of the sheets, Kat put on a satiny pair of shorts and shirt — Jasmine's whole life had a satiny theme— and walked out into the hexagonal corridor. Choosing the living room, she saw Jasmine splayed luxuriously across her couch.

"Morning of the," she yawned, "Abundant sun, Kat. There's a cup of coffee and a bit else for you on the table. I also put a journal out for you if you'd like it. I'm in practice."

Every morning, Jasmine made herself a complicated beverage of 20 herbs, then lay on her patio and stretched, and danced beneath the sun. After singing a few songs along with her lute, she took a plumed pen and wrote in her journal. Sometimes, she'd go down and swim in the ocean instead. After a king's brunch, she'd begin whatever ambitions for the day.

Kelsey had a morning routine where she ran a mile, took an ice bath, went to temple, and walked Niko to school each morning.

Kat could come up with a morning routine of her own, then. Her body felt awkward moving alongside Jasmine's, so she decided to do it in reverse, with no competition.

First, she would drink Jasmine's odd beverage. Then, her mind buzzing, read one of her books for a while.

Jasmine's bookshelves were extensive, but one shelf was clearly intended to take primacy. It was full of titles such as

Design Thinking for the Modern Age

The Political Spectrum Expressed In Architecture

Within and Around: Design for Deep Dreaming

The last one was a beige thing, with gold lettering. It would do.

Kat read as she listened to Jasmine play the lute outside. With curiosity, she eventually stepped out on the patio and stared in wonder at the jungle around her. Red & gold birds sang sweet nothings to her as she stared. A little ecstasy began to creep in, and Kat took a few twirls on the patio. It was lovely. But by the fourth twirl, her terror of her limited time had taken hold again.

She glanced at Jasmine, who was gone, and had probably stepped back towards the kitchen. Kat wandered back in.

She found Jasmine in the kitchen, artfully arranging slices of fruit and fish for breakfast.

meeting Zed

"Morning of the sun. Kelsey is coming over in ten minutes"

"Um, Jasmine— how do you tell time? Do you have a watch?"

Jaz giggled.

"I'm so sorry," she said, putting her head in her hands again. "I just realized how helpless you've been. Most surfaces here are responsive . Anything, with, like, this glint here at the edges, you can wake up a panel interface. And for time, just draw a circle with your hand and the clock will appear."

She pointed to the counter near her stove, "try here".

They had a brief 10 minute lesson on controls & technology before Kelsey walked in, this time not bothering Jasmine to come get her.

"Welcome abundance. I have something special for you," she smiled, "Can I see your hand?"

"Welcoming abundance," replied Kat, offering her hand up nervously.

"I'm going to place a thin film on your forefinger. It might feel a bit weird at first but it will feel more natural over time"

Kat squirmed.

"There we go," Kelsey smiled, mischievously, "now you have the same fingerprint as Nico."

"Clever?" piped Jasmine, raising her eyebrows. "But a little scary, Kels..."

"What?" laughed Kelsey, "it's perfect, no one is harmed! I'll pay gratitude for anything you get. But, Kat.... keep a low profile, try not to get anything a four year old wouldn't get. Like an ice cream, or a train ride. If you want anything, let Jasmine and I get it".

"Of course," nodded Kat, a little confusion.

"I'm sorry about the limitation," emphasized Kelsey, mistaking her confusion for disappointment, "I'll just get it for you, whatever you want" emphasized Kelsey.

It was a marvel. Most of the things they passed, Kat could never have hoped to see or experience in her whole life, and now Kelsey was apologizing *that she would have to buy it for her* .

Wild.

"Thank you," said Kat. "May the fruit of the earth prevail in our hearts," she added, as she had been taught.

Kelsey smiled proudly. "Great job. You sound great. I felt that".

"You've really thought this through, Kels?" asked Jasmine, "do you want to take a second?"

"We shouldn't take public transit together with Nico. But even if that happens, any analyst would assume a 4 year old pressed twice, and not another person"

"No one would be mad?"

“Who would be mad? And why? No harm, no foul. What other quiet channel could I use to get her transportation for my promise?”

Kat observed the world-class justification, and nodded. Jasmine shrugged. “Well, thanks for coming up with something”.

“You showed up at a very lucky time,” smiled Kelsey, “I was just about to start on a new waterfront redevelopment project, but I’m still on sabbatical. I just applied for a two week extension to my team, and luckily it went through, because there was a resource issue—”

"Morning of the sunnnnn, Zed's gonna come over soon!" squealed Jasmine.

"Do you really think it's wise to have anyone over now?" asked Kelsey.

"It's Zed "

"Fair. Valid."

Jasmine's proclivity towards guests had been shut down that week for Kat's presence. Her massive balcony neatly transformed into an entertainment space at night.

When Kat saw the furniture gently arranging itself per Jasmine's current needs, she laughed at all the times she drank beer sitting in the hallway or a stoop, the only place her and her friends could go . She would have loved to see a dinner party here.

But Jasmine and Kelsey both agreed that Kat would do terribly in such a high context environment. Kat resented that, even though it was true. Her simple presence in Jasmine's home would arouse all sorts of questions about why she was such an honored guest. And so far, they had already screwed up whose cousin Kat was, at least twice.

Emboldened by their energy, Kat continued to express her desire to learn more about their friends and their parties.

"I'm moved by how passionately you want to connect with the culture here," Kelsey would say, gently placing a hand on her shoulder— and ending the conversation entirely.

It honestly would have been fair of them to lock her in a closet for a week. But that wasn't in alignment with the culture. So the deal was that they could go out, if they encountered people, they would chat briefly, frame her as a cousin, and find a way to leave the conversation.

Kelsey's cousin, they reminded themselves. A few chosen friends, they could spend more time with.

"I mean, yeah, a dinner party here would be the worst, but we can take you *somewhere*", said Jasmine, "like the big dance on Saturday. You wouldn't need to talk much".

"Well she would need to be able to dance," interrupted Kelsey.

"I can dance!" exclaimed Kat.

"I thought you said that public dances were rare in Krall?" questioned Kelsey.

"They are. Someone taught me to dance. On the down low".

"Well," said Jasmine, "I'm sure your capacity for dance is infinite and beautiful, Kat, but I think you'll need time to gather the exact patterns to fit in here".

"But I guess we can give it a go, can't we?" said Kelsey, who seemed perpetually drunk on an invisible stream of hope.

And that's how Kat ended up with daily dance lessons, for one hour a day every single day.

No lessons, no dance.

"I think if you learn the four dominant patterns, that will be enough", said Kelsey, who turned out to be a particularly good teacher. Jasmine would be the one who said abstract things that were hard to put into any practice—

"Feel into your hips, loosen your spine and align your vertebrae as you twirl!"

"Stay aware of your own center, and of Kelsey's center!"

"Stretch into opposing forces, that's really going to awaken your practice."

"Also, bend your knees!", she added— actually saying something helpful for a change.

"We need a male partner for Kat, or it's going to be a weird time for her first dance" concluded Jasmine, after their first lesson.

"Zed can be our male dance partner, he's gonna be here anyway" proposed Kelsey.

"He's an....okay dancer" said Jasmine, raising an eyebrow.

"Maybe one of his friends?"

"Now that's a lot of people that we are pulling into this, don't you think?"

There was a chime that rang through the house. Jasmine went to the door.

Zed turned out to be a dark haired man of medium muscular build, sporting a bemused expression. He came into the room and hugged Jasmine and Kelsey warmly, before turning his attention to Kat.

"How is it that we haven't met yet?" he exclaimed.

"My family is Verdant min." said Kat, as they had rehearsed, "They weren't excited for me to come into the city too often"

"What a shame, what a shame. It's a pleasure to meet you!"

Zed fell onto one of the couches in Jasmine's place, as Jasmine pressed a button and a little table came over, the glass of which fell away to reveal four glasses and a pink, sparkling liquid.

" I **get** to have gotten my teeth cleaned just now," Zed said, dripping with sarcasm "How lucky am I to be in a world that can clean them so thoroughly? Afterwards, the dentist said 'It's an honor to serve you' and I said 'It's an honor to open my mouth for your service', and they didn't seem to like that at all."

Jasmine giggled.

"How does it feel to be in the city?" asked Zed, politely, turning to Kat.

Kat was thrilled because this was something she could be real about, "I love it! I think I might swear my loyalties to Ashe. And I'm really excited about the dance on Saturday"

"What was the longest you'd come in before?"

"Just every few months for a weekend or so starting in high school" began Kelsey.

"Let her speak for herself, Kels!"

"Zed, there's something I need your help with" interrupted Jasmine, curling up next to him before the conversation got out of hand. "Kat hasn't had a lot of experience dancing in the city, and you know verdant quarters have their own style—"

"I'm actually quite a fan, I think it's a little less pompous"

"Anyway," continued Jasmine, "will you be her first foray into city men?"

"Just for the dance?" winked Zed .

"She's my cousin," added Kelsey, though since Kat wasn't really, she didn't understand why Kelsey had taken such a biting tone there.

"Well, at your service," Zed said to Kat, with a small bow of his head, then raised his eyebrows

"You guys have been busy lately," he said to Kelsey & Jasmine, "Is this what you've been up to? Entertaining Kat"

"Yeah, more or less," said Jasmine.

t rain scene

After a hurried breakfast and many promises to connect later, Kelsey and Jaz rushed off a slightly confused Zed, so they could begin their day's adventures and talk frankly.

"Where do you want to go next?" asked Kelsey, turning to Kat.

Upon receiving her dumbfounded look, she replied, "Obviously! Let me give you some options".

Option A was a central comet, "something like a market," explained Kelsey, "where opinions and ideas are exchanged as frequently as goods & services".

Option B was the library, which Kelsey added, was quite the multi-sensory experience.

"I'll be happy to take you there on my own later, too!" piped up Jasmine.

Option C was the principal design academy, which Jasmine added might be a little overwhelming, and perhaps unwise as they weren't enrolled.

"There is so much to see, but I think we should start with these three first", said Kelsey,

"Do you have a zoo?" asked Kat

Kelsey winced, "Um, not quite a zoo, that's a little, um, honestly, calling something a zoo is a bit of a slur. Because of the whole cage thing. But if you want to see and connect with other animals, there are plenty of opportunities. Plenty of spaces in the city attract birds, squirrels flirt around preserves and I'm particularly fond of the raccoons . There's foxes, falcons— there's one pavilion that's full of monkeys, we can stop there. In Verdant, there's more space for horses , and zebras. Anyway, it's around, but it's not all in one place".

Kat nodded, and said "Let's visit the library. Or the Conservatory. Whatever you call it".

As they packed up and got ready to head out, Kat felt a little ashamed. The zoo in Krall was her favorite memory. Travis once snuck her in after hours. The wonder she felt— and now, that it was archaic, and wrong?

Of course, being stuck in a cage didn't seem like a great fate. But those animals were fed. And, she was pretty sure she would be condemned to their fate, soon enough—

“We're heading out in five minutes!,” yelled Jasmine from the other room, interrupting her thoughts. Kat got dressed.

Ten minutes later, they were walking over to a platform with a glowing fountain in the center of it. The water flipped into fantastic shades of orange and pink— “that means the Float will be here soon,” said Kelsey.

“Look at the floor,” she added, “do you see how it’s the same opal asphalt as the sidewalk? That signifies a public walking space, and it’s also protection against foot traffic. The material is quite sturdy. In college, I worked on a project that tried to use moss for the float platforms. I thought it would be romantic— that people might be inspired to lay down as they wait for the train. But in all my experiments, all my moss got trampled into a big mess”.

Kat laughed.

“There you go,” said Kelsey, shaking her head.

“It’s nice that they let you run the trials,” said Jasmine, “it did seem sort of obv —“

“—don’t say it”

They were interrupted by the water changing from pink & orange to a bright gold with specks of green. A gentle chime, from — somewhere?— began to play on the platform.

“Float arriving,” announced Jasmine.

A geometric glass oval began its descent towards the platform.

“Get ready to take off your shoes”, said Kelsey.

The train landed as softly as a bird upon the platform. The glass doors opened and revealed.....a tea house? On the right hand side indeed was a spot to

hang their shoes up. Kelsey & Jasmine took out their key cards, and scanned the sign on the right as they got on. Jasmine shot Kat a furtive “copy me” look.

Kat removed her shoes and rested them on a hanger. She stared at the floor which was made of ...?

“A manufactured type of sand,” said Kelsey, “it inspires levity & playfulness in travel, but it’s also self-cleaning— there’s a component to the material that’s anti-bacterial”

“How was that made?” asked Kat,

“I think there was a competition to create it—“

“In the year 257 QR, and my parents won!” yelled someone from across the room, quickly striding over, “Hi, Kelsey!”

“Hi Kevin!” she exclaimed joyfully, “what a blessing to see you”

“and you as well, Jasmine. And— I don’t think we’ve met”, Kevin’s eyes narrowed.

“This is my cousin Kat, from Verdant. You must have met, but only once or twice. She really prefers temples to parties”.

“Oh, well it seems we need more time to get to know each other, then”, said Kevin, ever charismatic and slightly embarrassed. “Are you going to the market? There’s a lot of debate about the best way to personalize shopping preferences without doubling down on biases and expectations”.

“That does sound tempting,” said Kelsey.

“Well, we were going to the library”

“We could change our minds!” said Kat, who had no idea what it meant to personalize shopping preferences, and what biases and expectations had to do with it. But it seemed obvious that Kelsey and Kevin were friends. Something was twisting inside of her, as she thought of the people she had gone to school with. Many weren’t her favorite, and a good deal were just bullies. But she would never be close with Kelsey the way that Kevin was—

“What's your take on personalized advertising?” asked Kevin, interrupting with unintentional malice.

“I mean, in Verdant” (Kelsey had jumped in to save her) “they aren’t generally fans of advertising and commerce, and more personalization makes advertising less necessary, I think. I really don’t see what the cost would be.”

“It means that you’re handing over your options and tastes as soon as you’re like ...10 years old, ” replied Jasmine, angrily, “Systems create an impression of you, and what you like, and it locks you into a system of taste at an unfairly young age. It all builds and redirects upon itself!”

“Sounds like we are going to the market”, grinned Kevin. “I’m sorry we won’t have time to sit down and really enjoy some tea, but there's always more time for that later, or so they say”.

Kevin kept up the probing questions for the rest of the ride, making Kat feel like she was in a field of landmines. Nonetheless, she decided to like him.

Luckily, they got off on the next step.

Kat's first sight was an array of fountains, criss crossing in a maze like pattern.

“Kat,” whispered Kelsey, “let’s keep the questions down low, okay? If you don’t understand, say nothing. I’ll cover. And remember, you're from Verdant. Say you've met before. People will feel embarrassed to have forgotten you”.

Kat nodded, feeling her heart rate rise.

She shook her head and looked at the maze of water, which was pure wonder. The water seemed to come from beneath the floor, and then bent into extraordinary waves that intersected and overlapped with one another.

“It’s sound”, said Jasmine, “whispering in her ear. A blend of mechanical motion and sound—”.

“Why can’t I hear anything?” whispered Kat.

“Noise cancellation”

The dripping arcs of water rose as high as 40 or 50 ft. Kat must have been gaping, because Jasmine said, “isn’t it beautiful? I always sit and marvel at this when I come here” (perhaps a little bit too loudly). The light shone off the waves, brighter than Kat had ever seen water before. As if blushing beneath her awe, the waves shimmered.

“I don’t know about you guys,” said Kevin, “but I’m starving. Why don’t we go in and have a bite before the debate at 3?”

They all headed.....straight for the fountain. Which was....unexpected? Kat took a deep breath and prepared for water to fall all over her. As they moved inwards, the water separated, as if an invisible dome was being build all around them. A shimmer appeared on the water all around them. Kat made a mental note to ask Kelsey how this was happening.

“Laminar water flow. Plus, it's not true water”, whispered Jasmine, “it’s laced.

“With what?” whispered Kat.

Jasmine shook her head, “some sort of iron. I'd have to look it up. Bet you Kevin knows”.

Twenty feet into the fountain maze, a marble plaza opened up before them, with a hundred curved tables and what appeared to be a chef cooking for each

one . It was surreal. Upon each table stood a little kitchen of kinds, but it seemed to be intended more for entertainment. Children pointed and marveled as chefs sautéed noodles and lit fish on fire.

“This way,” said Kevin, “one of my friends should be here”.

Kevin guided them about 10 tables in, then smiled up at a man with freckled skin and kind eyes. “Have space for four?,” he asked.

“You’re lucky,” the man laughed, “I just finished up with three families— take a seat. Kelsey, I remember you. I’m Dax”.

“A joy to see you,” said Kelsey, “I have my cousin with me today”.

Dax turned his attention to sautéing some vegetables as they all sat down. Then, reaching into another saucepan, he scooped a helping of dumplings onto each plate.

“Beet & goat cheese dumplings, with sage and celery. Eat quick before they get cold”.

"So, Kat, right?" began Kevin, "that short for anything?"

"Katherine"

"You seem young, Kat. You still in school?"

"Verdantia," intervened Kelsey. "She's studying different types of moss, more or less".

(Yesterday, they had come up with a persona for Kat, and everyone had decided that moss was something people weren't going to have many follow up questions with. Plus, because of that project Kelsey did in school, she might be able to fill any gaps that came up.

Jasmine was adamant that Kat should actually spend some time studying moss, and Kat had agreed to that, and well— here they were, the next morning).

"There's not much I can say to that," said Dax, listening from above "the only moss I'm familiar with is Irish moss, and that's a lichen".

"I've got something," said Kevin, "do you think moss should be allowed to grow on the capital building?"

"The designs Verdantia submits for the capital are beautiful" said Kelsey, "but I also see the opposition's perspective—"

"What an overbearing cousin!" said Kevin, "let the girl speak".

Panicking, and not wanting to disappoint her friends, Kat jumped in, "moss on the capital building indicates long-term stability; that the capital has been around long enough for moss to grow"

It was a completely inane comment that she'd just made up. She cringed internally for a moment, then looked up with surprise to see Kevin nodding.

"That's a powerful perspective, Kat" said Kevin, "I can see that".

Kat had to stop herself from rolling her eyes. Jasmine kicked her under the table.

Kat could almost imagine their silent exchange—

He's trying to be kind and make you feel included!

Sure, but the idea moss symbolizes something big is sort of stupid.

—disrespectful, Kat!

"So, tell me— " said Jasmine, saving the conversation, "what topics are going to be discussed today in square?"

"Motion sensitive lighting for the whole city," Dax chimed right in, plating a second course — "that's a popular motion. My cousin is on that panel, I'll be going to support her"

"That's going to be settled so fast, Dax".

"She's still nervous," laughed Dax.

"Another motion to build another five robotic factories beneath the earth, underneath land currently under Logal interests"

"Okay, that's going to pass, too—"

"Okay, there's the motion to re-pave circular streets in the entire city, which may be compromised to a new circular district. Don't even get me started on that, crazy waste of resources—"

"I'm in favor!" said Kelsey, "the social gains will be immeasurable— it seems like a huge re-apportioning of resources, but we do have to think of the children"

Kat was pretty sure Kelsey had said that just to propel the conversation, and she sighed with relief. Kevin and Kelsey, with occasional input from Jasmine and Dax, managed to fill an entire half hour with debate about circular society. Which was pretty impressive, because the 'circular society' proposal would have meant construction for literally everyone, all at once.

It was never going to pass. But it did get people going.

"There's always something on the ballot so ridiculous that you think it was placed there for entertainment," said Kevin, finally "but truly the most

controversial items will be around tiny adjustments to the merit system, and expanded personalization permissions".

"Well, let's scope it out," said Jasmine, with a tone in her voice that implied she'd rather do anything else.

They left, wonderfully nourished, after a 5 course meal with Dax and little ice cream cones.

"Will you come sit with us?" asked Kevin, to Dax, "I think you're working yourself to death".

"You flatter me, you're only my second round. I'll do one more. Then I'll go sit with my cousin, but if I see you. I'll say hi".

The plaza unfurled into an even larger glass dome, with a huge screen on one side, a stage in front and hundreds of chairs, poufs and couches in the center. Little mechanical bars about two feet high served up drinks to the patrons who watched the events. All around the perimeter of the dome were various shops that opened up in 20 different creative fashions.

One store had a curtain of colorful silk that blocked half the view of the items inside, but created quite the entrance. Another store was mostly plants and roses that spilled out. They all had an air of little commercial caves, beckoning.

"I need to shop around," said Jasmine, "why don't we get a place in the center, snag a few drinks and you guys can sit here if you want"

"Should I come with you?" asked Kat.

"I could use a moment alone," said Jasmine, "why don't you connect with Kevin and Kelsey and listen to the debates?"

debate scene (unfinished)

Kat watched as the team took the stage. There were five delegates, polished and friendly-looking, with maybe a flicker of nervousness that passed through them. As the team took their comfortable looking seats on the left side of the stage, the chairs flashed in colors; three of them green, and the other two red.

The large screen behind them showed the following text:

- Capping project allocation third party delegates to 8% of the total vote (current caps sit at 12%)
- Revisiting education requirements to domain scoped delegation; expertise is based on ability to discuss the topic rather than take a test
- Setting delegation lapse periods to 5 years (currently no cap) with no more than 3 reaffirmation periods
- Create a public channel that showed delegation votes, with trends and patterns highlighted.

What the hell , thought Kat.

Kelsey, who had of course taken the seat right next to Kat, leaned in close to her.

“This is a play against Ashe, Kat,” she whispered, shaking her head, “I hate revisitation. Like there’s not enough to keep people busy? It’s not gonna pass”.

“Blessings on this time to speak our minds,” began the delegate. “We are lucky to have so many perspectives, and the patience to receive them. I’m Tim Naskwin”

Kat swore she saw several people roll their eyes.

"It's a tradition," whispered Kelsey, "to say that when you start".

Kelsey leaned in again,

"Think of this like..... if *you* wanted to come in and be a super delegate in, say, transportation, but you'd never studied it"

"Oh" said Kat, eyebrows raising in alarm.

The screen behind the orator shifted, and showed circles moving and expanding and taking up part of a whole in a way that thoroughly confused Kat.

"As you can see here, as much as 64% of votes in the Milalese system can be attributed to a handful of super delegates. We need to be continuously updating voting reform to keep monopolies at bay," continued the presenter.

"Can't let things get too stable," whispered Kevin to Kelsey.

Kat watched as his colleagues stood up and shared their views, displaying graphs that showed an alarming rise in super-delegates power. Kat found herself concerned as well. As each presenter added their details, she started to wonder if this was a problem indeed, and maybe Kelsey was blind to it.

There was a smattering of applause.

Kat watched as another five people rose from the audience took the stage, one of them seemed to wink at Kevin as they passed by. This time, their chairs flashed three gold and two red.

"Thank you for taking the time to consider this so deeply," began the first woman, and launched into a short but compelling speech that the delegate problem wasn't as alarming as it seemed.

As each person spoke, Kat felt calmer and calmer. Maybe Mililac voting was doing just fine? It seemed just fine to her...

A woman with long, dark hair, rose and shared,

"The challengers that bring forward this proposal seek to reduce monopoly and homogeneity in institutional design, a great goal. But there are real, physical risks to Milalese citizens at removing the testing requirements. Many design projects have physical risks to citizens that their authors need to understand.

The ability to produce content on a topic is an indicator of imaginative thinking, but a weak indicator of understanding risks and current practices.

The cost of forcing delegates to go through educational programs is small, the cost of forgoing it is greater. Independent thought can withstand education to the contrary."

A wave of applause followed her remarks, and Kat joined in with the rest of them.

The floor opened up to commentary.

"This is a well intentioned project that will have an overall negative impact on voting," said an older, tawdry man as his voice amplified the arena, "We just passed a voting reform three years ago, passing another now will confuse people, especially our older populations. The intention of this project is to increase voter participation and diversity, but it may intimidate people away from engaging with the vote."

"He's a little intense" Kevin raised his eyebrows, whispering to Kat and Kelsey "it's an indirect angle".

"Yeah" said Kelsey, "I should have gone first"

Kelsey pressed a button that amplified her voice, "I want to raise the concerns of productivity— setting a harder ceiling on delegated voting would set back expansion in Mililac significantly, and slow down operations. There have been estimations that for every 1% of capping, whether through hard ceiling or transitivity, we lose twice that in efficiency. Delegation is a powerful way participants feel a full expression of agency, without having to engage in the full stream of voting information."

"Everyone knows what *you* think, Kelsey", boomed a snappy voice coming from a curly haired woman in the front, "that's kind of the point of this, isn't it?".

"That's out of line," Kat heard Kevin whisper.

Kelsey frowned, but kept her composure and continued, ignoring the interruption "However, the proposal for voting transparency, letting people know when their delegates are no longer representational, seems like a useful project. Instead of rebuilding the old, this adds a layer of accountability that would be beneficial to all of Mililac"

There was clapping all over the room as Kelsey sat down.

After 20 mind-boggling moments of debate (where Kat started to get weary), $\frac{4}{5}$ of the motion failed, except the last point.

"I bet they set up the proposal that way," mused Kelsey, "so that the last point seemed more reasonable. I wouldn't put it past that group".

"Yeah, exactly. The educational programs aren't that long. If you want to have a strong opinion about something, you can spend at least 6 months studying it".

The next topic came up, and around personalization in advertising. She watched hundreds of people speak until she felt exhausted. Dozens of questions swam through her mind, but she knew she couldn't ask them in front of Kevin.

"Where's Jasmine? Shouldn't she be back by now?" she asked instead.

Kevin placed his hands on the table next to them, which seemed to unlock something. He pressed a few buttons. He frowned,

"She's with Zed"

"Huh," said Kelsey, "I guess they must have ran into each other. If they had plans to meet up, they would have said something this morning right?"

"Hardly," said Kevin. Kevin and Kelsey exchanged a look, but no one explained everything to Kat.

Kat jumped in to fill an awkward silence "He's funny".

"I guess, in a not-always-appropriate kind of way," Kevin frowned, "But I guess he's got to cope somehow. You know about the drama with his family, right?"

"No," replied Kat, as Kelsey flipped a concerned expression, "I don't".

"I mean, it's old news," said Kels, "such a long time ago."

"It's related to the caps. There's dozens of caps; no one individual can own more than .4% of GDP, and no one family owns more than 1.8% of real estate. And the rules of family are strict."

"What happens if you go over?" asked Kat. She had been wondering what the punishment system was in a place so painfully compassionate.

"Well, no one would put themselves in that position. There would be a trial, it would be very challenging finding ethical redistribution"

Kat's head was buzzing. She compiled a mental list of questions to ask Kelsey later.

- So there was a limit on resources?
- Was everything privately owned? What was publicly owned?
- Who decided who had what, anyway?

“Anyway, Zed’s grandmother, Cora, was the head of the committee that tracked the data on resources, ownership, and the algorithms that highlighted percentages. At the age of 58, she had led that committee for about 22 years. She was outed. It turned out that Zed’s family owned, at the time, 2.3% of all of Mililac’s real estate.”

“Was it a mistake?”

“One hell of a mistake, Kat,” said Kelsey, “It was the trial of the decade”

“God, Kat, you make me feel so old,” sighed Kevin, “It was an explosion when Kelsey and I were in kindergarten. I’m surprised people in Verdant aren’t still talking about it”

“Well, Kat’s family is a little radical”

“Still—”

“So, anyway, Brendan’s family defended Cora—”

“Brendan?”

“Oh you’ll meet him, Kat” snapped Kelsey, with a surprising bitterness.

“They defended her,” continued Kevin, “they said her actions had shed a light on society. That if the lead of a committee could hide her actions for so long, then that meant that our systems were broken.

They said we shouldn't see this as a simple abuse of power case, that would scapegoat Cora. Brendan's father actually argued that anyone would do the same for their family, and we had to hold our systems accountable for the lack of transparency. That we need to build something that simply can't be hacked. That the entire team should be put on trial for their lack of scrutiny".

"Yeah, that argument didn't get far. So then, Brendan's family came under some pretty intense scrutiny, as you might imagine," added Kelsey, "And everyone associated with them did. But no one found anything. They hit the 1.8% mark, almost on the dot."

"It's so suspicious, but all independent analysis of all their holdings showed the same".

"Including my own," said Kelsey, "I've lead two in the last decade"

"Two?" Kevin raised his eyebrows, "when did the second one happen?"

"Last year," said Kelsey, biting her lip.

"Kels," said Kevin, his voice ringing with concern, "Last year? You gotta stop the witch hunt".

Kelsey sighed and put her hands up to her temples, "I know." Then she shook her head "look, if there's any family that could use a little scrutiny, it's that one".

Just that moment, Jasmine shuffled in, hand in hand with Zed "Are we almost wrapped up here?," she asked, "So sorry to miss it all!"

Kat bet she wasn't.

Zed embraced Kat with a warm hug, "What a surprise to see you at the market after all!"

"Pardon! We changed our plans last minute," she replied.

Kevin and Zed exchanged pleasantries but it was clear no real warmth passed between them.

Kelsey & Jaz apology; random convo

Kevin took off shortly, but Zed was hard to shake for the second time.

Both Kelsey and Jasmine hated lying to him, and Kat began to feel guilty by proxy. There weren't a lot of good reasons all three of them had to decline his invite for dinner.

"We should just tell him," said Jasmine, angrily, turning to Kelsey as soon as they crossed the fountain. "We told Peter. It's not fair"

"Yes, but I told Peter in the privacy of our home, not a public market"

Jasmine gave a small nod to acknowledge the difference.

"Kat, how would you feel about it?" asked Jasmine, "Zed is one of our oldest friends"

"Keep in mind Jasmine has a million old friends," Kelsey interrupted.

"What the hell does that mean?" snapped Jasmine.

"I'm just saying that I can trust Peter with my life. Zed's his own animal"

Jasmine shook her head, annoyed, "that's not fair, Kels"

“Do you really trust him that much?”

Jasmine stopped walking. She glared at Kelsey, then looked down at her shoes, and in a strained voice, said— “Kels.....he’s our *friend*”.

Kelsey didn’t reply. There was an icy silence between them that stretched out for two blocks. Kat hung back and focused on her steps.

They passed underneath a tree covered with cherry blossoms.

“Shall we?” asked Jasmine, looking up at Kelsey.

Kelsey paused like she wanted to explain something to Kat, and then decided this moment was more important.

She grasped Jasmine's hands as they stood beneath the cherry tree, and said, "I'm sorry for cultivating insufficiency in someone you love, and by proxy you. I promise to try harder to reflect your own abundance"

"Thank you for acknowledging that," said Jasmine, "I'll try to create more space for your flow of discernment".

"Thank you," said Kelsey, and they hugged.

The whole thing seemed a little staged to Kat, but both of them seemed happier afterwards.

The topic went back to the Comets.

"I don't really care" is totally a valid opinion to express in any public forum" said Kelsey, “Keeps people in check, honestly. You can just say that, and move on”.

Jasmine shook her head, "I just wish the market and commons were separate entities".

"But then no one would go to the commons," said Kelsey, "or the market, really", she added on second thought.

Public life concentrated commerce & politics into a central spot, because half the people didn't care for one, half didn't care for the other, and both the economy and legislature was thought to improve with both.

The one they'd just visited was for concerns that affected all of Mililac; most concerns were localized to neighborhood design.

"I've been told that I'm not very integrative," sighed Jasmine, "but I think there's value in purity, the simplicity of having one central focus and allow—

"People really tend to be attracted towards one or the other, isolating would force specialization—"

"Specialization is not a bad word! I would rather specialize in what I love and just be let be..."

"But it would lead to a huge underrepresentation of people like you in commons spaces, come on, Jaz'

Kat started to tune out because her head was spinning trying to follow their conversation, and she was tired from the day's content. She remembered overhearing an eager debate whether the senate should continue to encourage costume for decorum, or if that was a stifling expression of creativity. Jaz was right to say it was too much.

She wasn't used to caring about any of these things. At home, almost everyone cared about getting food, staying out of trouble, and whatever tasks their families needed support with.

Mililac citizens care about absolutely everything— and most of the things they cared about seemed sort of.....superficial to her.

Kelsey had shaken her head vehemently when Kat had admitted this.

"It's not superficial, Kat, it's symbolic. So the question of whether a public structure should be built around & integrated with a forest or if it should just out like a contemporary abstraction is also a question of values and it will shape, quite literally, the perspective of everyone in this space. So every decision henceforth will be influenced by the values of the designer."

Mililac was wondrous in its diversity, but the closer you got to the center, the more you started to see a unique emblem of style. This was a perfect blend of the right amount of integration in nature, a small amount of contemporary abstraction, lots of rounded domes and gilded ornate accents.

The further you got from the city center, the stranger the designs would appear. In the far reaching burrows, you would find forests that almost completely concealed a town (how did anyone find anything?), to a district that floated through magnetism, to a truly terrifying part of town that had too much death cult imagery for her tastes, for sure.

Passing through that district cultivated Kat's first political design opinion. As they passed over a bridge of skulls, Jasmine and Kelsey couldn't stop laughing at her disgust,

"The idea," chuckled Jasmine, "is that facing death is something we should do in the prime of our health, and throughout all the years. And we should befriend it".

"Yeah, I definitely get the idea", said Kat, in a tone of voice that sent the other two into peals of laughter.

She cringed as they passed a screen showing decomposing plants being taken over and transforming into mycelium.

n ighttime anxiety

Back in her room at Jasmine's, Kat paced back and forth. 9 days left. Her mind went through the familiar script— Stay? Die. Leave? Die. Stay? Learn. Worth it? Maybe, but she couldn't fall asleep.

She heard a knock on her door.

"Kat?" asked Jasmine.

"Yeah"

"May I come in?"

"I....it's your house".

Jasmine opened up the doorway, and looked at her, softly.

"Worried?" she asked, looking at her eyes. Kat said nothing.

"I used to have trouble sleeping, as a kid", she continued. Kat didn't see why that was particularly relevant to her troubles. "I heard you walking back and forth"

"There's some tools in your room that can help you fall asleep", she said. Jasmine took a step further into what was now 'Kat's room', apparently.

She flipped a light and the room went into a soft shade of dark purple, with stars lightly shimmering in the background on the walls. A few buttons later, a deep droning sound gently poured through the speakers, mixed with a light flute. She pulled a candle from a cupboard, "lavender" she said.

She also pulled a tincture from her pocket, "Sometimes this can help, as well. If you need this for more than three days in a row, talk to me, okay? Put 5 drops underneath your tongue".

"Try to remember what we're learning at the temple. We will go again tomorrow. I would get in bed if I were you," said Jasmine, moving to exit the room. "Oh, and Kat" she said at the door, "I usually sleep naked. Give that a go if you like".

Kat raised her eyebrows as Jasmine left. She'd never had the privacy (or at least, the expectation of privacy) growing up. She listened for Jasmine's footsteps fading away, then looked at the bed and pulled back the soft blanket. Suddenly she remembered how soft the sheets were. Maybe that would feel nice.

Kat slowly took off her clothes, as if performing a secret ritual.

She crawled in bed. "Oh my god," she whispered, taking in the pleasure of the cool, silky sheets all over her. I can't believe this is how they live.

She was asleep in minutes.

Chapter 5

Explaining wellness practices

"Wholeness practices are any activity you do that brings a person to a state of remembrance" droned on Kelsey in her usual lecture.

There were at least 37 different kinds of practiced meditation in the city, with 42 public temples.

"It's important to realize that wholeness practice isn't just something you do for 30 minutes a day, that's ordained as such, it's a way of life", she added.

They had just stepped away from temple practice, yet again. As Kelsey said this, she gestured to the well outside the temple.

As she placed her hand on the rim, lettering appeared in gold.

"deep within you is a well of resources that you can draw upon at any moment, and that can help you navigate reality".

"Want a drink?" asked Kelsey, as a cup appeared.

"Absolutely", said Kat. Feeling a bit foolish, she added, "my family taught me that no matter how difficult a situation was, I would find a way to move forward and endure it. Is this similar?"

"No", said both Jasmine and Kat in unison.

"Okay," that wasn't really fair, said Jasmine, "because there is a similarity. It just hurts me how harshly that was phrased. A rose by any other name is not as sweet" .

"Precisely," chimed in Kelsey, "endurance is critical, as is patience, but you need a bit more spice for creativity or growth. So it's in the same vein but.....different. Because your end goal is to bring about change, not just survive"

"Yeah, I get you".

central Library

After Kelsey went off to meet Nico, Jasmine took her to the library.

Much to Kat's surprise, Jasmine began with a lecture on its peculiarities.

"In the extended city, there are 38 libraries. The original team composed of 8 dedicated members for first architecture design, in collaboration with an original team of 8 on knowledge structure. The design process took 7 months, with construction spanning 4 years— that's how slow things were at the time. The material the libraries favor—"

"I'm surprised you know so much about libraries" interrupted Kat.

"Why?" said Jasmine, genuinely confused.

Kat swallowed her foot.

"Not that I think this.... " she stammered, "but I would imagine..... that um, maybe other people would think, that I mean...well, you do work in fashion"

Jasmine's confusion was so beautiful that Kat didn't want to continue to explain herself. So she shook her head, and swiftly said 'never mind', and asked "so when was the first library founded?"

Exactly year 0.

Lexarvia was the largest central library; it had hundreds of digital spin offs all throughout the boroughs, but since a high speed train could take you to Lexarvia within 30 minutes of most locations...it was still the preferred spot.

"The dissemination of accurate information is one of the most vital tasks of any thriving society", said Jasmine. "You know, I almost pledged my life to the library as a girl".

"Why didn't you?"

She shrugged. "I dunno. Once I hit puberty, the library seemed to be a prudish path. It's fun helping people feel beautiful. Kinda a girl's girl, you know?"

Kat didn't.

"Maybe one day I'll shift gears, if I get bored. But I'm still a member, and a leading one. The library has an army of volunteer forces. I'll walk you through."

They got off at the Cloister A train stop.

"Welcome to the campus," said Jasmine.

The campus resembled a series of iridescent castles, bridges and moats.

Kat stopped, stunned.

"Okay, you know we can move slowly—" said Jasmine, tapping Kat on the shoulder, "but we do have to move, you know"

"I'm walking".

They made their way across a wrought iron fractal bridge. A simple sculpture greeted them as they walked towards the library. A conch shell, made of, conch shells?

One conch shell at the bottom.

Then another shell, suspended in the air.

Then a group of two shells, stacked on top of one another. An inch away, Three conch shells. Five. Eight. All suspended in the air with no sensibility and growing in form.

Jasmine placed her hand on the sculpture.

The shells flashed green. And then an archway made out of perhaps 100 stones awaited them. Glittering, beautiful stones.

They passed over a bridge that had colorful stones in different patterns that all started with one, and rose to great highs, then all came back down to one.

"You could spend your whole life here, Kat, and not see everything there was. You can borrow physical copies of books, of course, but almost no one needs to anymore. There's an interactive sculpture garden for almost every great scientific progression. The grounds are three miles long."

"Three miles?!"

"Well, we've learned a lot as a society. And pretty much every high school class works on memorializing a learning for the library in a kinetic sculpture. Then, all you have to do to remember your education is to take a stroll".

They walked towards the largest structure, and Kat's eyes caught on long, narrow walkways projected out from the main complex. High up in the air,

easily 100 ft off the ground. She shivered, suddenly remembering stories of pirates who walked the plank.

At the walkway's end were open circles, just big enough to sit in. Scooped out a little, with gentle guard rails preventing the person inside from falling out. Some had glass domes that were raised, while others were completely exposed.

A woman a hundred feet up from Kat sat there with a serene look, her long, white hair flowing behind her.

"What is she doing there?", she asked Jasmine.

"In the spires?" asked Jasmine.

"What's a spire?"

"Oh. Those up there. They're like tiny temple spaces, you can meditate in them."

"A little scary up there, no?"

"That's the idea. Someone suggested building these spire spaces around the library, for people to have ideas in. It took off. You know what I used to be scared of the most, growing up?"

"Falling out?"

"No. I used to worry that I would go up there, and nothing would happen," said Jaz, "That I would sit there bored, for a long time, like I do in temple sometimes. I was so scared nothing would happen and it would mean that I was....I dunno, empty. But once I got up there, with all the fear coursing through me, and the expansiveness of the view and just breathing through it... I decided to open up my shop & studio on...." she pointed, "that spire over there"

Kat nodded.

"Do you want to try it?" asked Jasmine.

"Yeah" said Kat, surprised by the curiosity opening up within her. "I do".

"We might have to wait a while. But let's go sign up. I'll write you in as me. Let's make sure no one sees us as you get up there. But once you're out there, you're not identifiable. I don't think anyone is going to ask questions".

They entered a gilded hall of infinite bookcases. The book cases curved upwards and over to the ceiling in a way that made Kat flinch, because she thought an array of books would cascade on her.

"Relax," laughed Jasmine, "They are glued in, it's all decorative". Plush velvet and the same rosewood that was Jasmine's 'favorite aesthetic' took the lead all around her.

"Nowadays everything is digital, of course, but we still preserve the old copies. And it's an aesthetic almost everyone likes. I wonder if that will change one day, but it's been 160 years so far and we still like it!"

Nostalgia has won out in tablet design as well. Most citizens of Mililac carried a tablet that could morph into a million books at will. Designs for the tablets varied, but the most popular was minimalist, and nostalgic (resembling an old book). Some people turned theirs into gigantic butterflies or oddly responsive pets.

Jasmine reached into her bag and pulled hers out as she spoke. An old doll giggled, and then revealed a screen in her belly.

"That's an interesting design choice" said Kat, practicing her newfound mannerisms.

"Well I'm just weird," smiled Jasmine.

Like most of Mililac design, there was an emphasis on light, and the way light was reflected by the materials. Once they moved past the entrance into a central dome, the gold patterned semi-transparent vaulted ceilings added an air of grandeur. She would have to ask Jasmine what this was made of. Maybe she could even go into the material science section of the library.

In the center of the dome sat a replica of the blazing sun about the size of a soccer ball. Everything was illuminated by it. Jasmine smiled.

Like Jasmine's own home, the dome opened up in six hallways. Their names were emblazed in a gold cursive above the hallways.

- Abstraction, Philosophy, Logic & Mathematics
- Fiction, Art & Storytelling
- Design & Architecture
- Medicine, Health, Chemistry and Biology
- Physics & Technology
- Society, Law, Governance and Anthropology

Kat felt frozen, unable to choose a direction. Jasmine raised her eyebrows, but didn't interfere to save her for a few moments.

Finally, she laughed and said "okay...let's choose randomly". She took Kat's hand and took her down the Society, Law and Governance track.

"I'd love to learn the history of Mililac" said Kat.

"That's not a bad idea. Let's walk over. Come now, stare at the floor," laughed Jasmine, "it's really not a bad start".

Kat stared down as what appeared to be a dozen states morph and changed; get skinnier and fatter, eat one another, spread into 5, until they slowly morphed into one mega blob, that divided in two".

"So history deals with the politics of the past. But it's just one dimension of "what happened?". The technological and cultural changes impacted the world. We see it just as much as, you know, 'the powers that be'. So what are you seeing?" asked Jasmine in her best school teacher voice.

"It seems like in the spot where Mililac is now, there were a dozen tribes, or states, that fought with one another, and then there was one huge conglomerate. That split in two. Wait, Jasmine, so what does everyone know about Krall?"

"Well, we don't call it Krall, we call it Maschgel, and it's....usually described as a band with very different values," Jasmine frowned, "we use it as a slur, often. A lot of people think it's just a story, not a historical truth."

"Krall isn't a small band. It's...." Kat gestured desperately, realizing she didn't have any meaningful measurement descriptions, "it's huge".

"How huge?" asked Jasmine

Kat sighed. "I don't know. You can walk as far as you want in any direction all day and there will be more. There's 18 different districts."

"There are districts here, too. Remember, I promised to take you to Verdant, and the forest district tomorrow? Pretty much everyone agrees that generally building the city in alignment with nature is a good idea; but the forest district takes it to another level."

"No one in Krall knows about Mililac".

"Well," sighed Jasmine, "ignorance and misinformation is the strongest defense. Maybe this is a good time to talk about basic politics, because you

need to learn this stuff, and quickly too."

Kat learned that Mililac is a symbolic monarchy and technological democracy. The descendants of the founder of Mililac seek to convey the spirit and essence of the founder's wishes; it's a little mythical and some people like it and some don't.

The founder had a singular name of Midanta. Many people- especially Midanta herself- despised excessive celebration of a single leader, as it underestimates the complexity and contributions of everyone alive and involved at the time. But nonetheless, against her will, people honor her in a festival, every year.

"Honestly, Kat, everything I know about her is pretty great. She lived to the age of 132, which was crazy old back then,

Actual decision making about the city's resources is wielded through a system that allows us to share our preferences, choose alternatives. We have systems in place that create alternative paths between conflicts, until something that a majority can agree on arises.

"Can't that system be hacked?" asked Kat.

"Not really. But I'm going to butcher the explanation as to why. Kelsey would have been a great support here. Let's take the stairs," Jasmine motioned.

Kat followed her. Jasmine turned back and grinned, "you nervous? We're walking up to my favorite spire".

Kat smiled, "terrified".

After a decent climb, they got off on the seventh floor of the staircase, and Jasmine turned to the right,

"Zed!" Jasmine exclaimed, "Woah. Who would have thought you'd be here?"

Zed laughed, and picked Jasmine up and kissed her on the cheek. “We love this spot, right?”

“Yeah—”

“Are you taking Kat up here for her first time? Did I just get lucky to catch her first spire?”

“No, no! She’s uh, scared of it, big fear of heights thing, we just wanted to take the first step of scoping it out”.

“Oh, Kat!” said Zed, the very picture of reassurance, “now you’re already here, it’s just one small step”

“No, no, I’m too scared” said Kat, keeping in step with Jasmine.

“You just scan your fingerprint on the left, and then you walk. You can keep the protections on, you won’t fall off”

Jasmine bit her lip, nervously. Kat’s heart started to pound. She looked down the hallway, hoping a distraction would keep up. She stole a small gaze at the fingerprint machine.

“No, I’m sorry. I’m just not ready. Jasmine said we’d come up here, and I could think about it in two weeks. Plus, we have to run, my mom is waiting for us for dinner”.

spiral swirl restaurant

Kat and Jasmine walked promptly out of the library and it was several blocks before they said anything.

They'd just passed their third "tiered sidewalk", iron-covered-in-ivy waves that came up in curves above the usual sidewalk. There were places every now and then you could climb the sides if you wanted.

"Is he...like, always around?" asked Kat, finally.

"No. No! Not at all. Honestly, we haven't bumped into each other like that in months. Been a weird few days" admitted Jasmine. "But it's not that crazy, I mean he does have my location?"

"Like he tracks you?"

"No," laughed Jasmine, "No, not like that. If you're friends with people, you can share your location. Family members usually do it by default. Less popular in Verdant, as you can imagine, the data comes from tablet location or fingerprint check ins. Zed shares his location with me, too. But I got into the habit of hiding it."

"Hiding it?"

"Yeah, like I don't get notifications, and I don't see him on our map. Unless I look for him specifically. I try not too"

"Oh?" said Kat, a bit confused.

"Yeah, it's like a whole thing," said Jasmine, "Anyway, sharing location can take the surprise out of life? Don't you think?"

Kat followed Jasmine's footsteps,

"Most everything here is of Ashe design," said Jasmine as she caressed a bell flower "meant to reflect and inspire inner balance and harmony". The soft waves of her dark hair sparkled around her smile, gazing at the flower.

Kat learned that if you take the lower sidewalk, you're submerged in greenery. But if you take the higher tier, you get a lovely view of the city and a bit of a thrill— and some even have a third tier.

"Isn't that dangerous?"

"People were worried about intoxication; and measures were proposed. But actually, there have been very few accidents. They made the last tiers sort of difficult to get to— some people straight up climb like monkeys, like in Verdant", laughed Jasmine.

"Hey, hold on a second," said Jaz, "There's a new dance studio around the corner".

Jasmine stopped in front of a curved building with a stone facade. Kat didn't understand how, but painted figures danced upon the stone like a moving cave painting.

Jasmine swiped her hand on the side of the building, and tapped a few things. A screen with a list of options appeared in front of her. She knocked twice.

A man with dark skin and short purple hair appeared on the screen in front of her,

"Jasmine Colet, welcome"

"Remember my knee injury from last year? I'm trying to figure out if this dance class would work"

"I'll run your records through some physical therapy advice, and map that with the style and teaching curriculum offered here." The figure frowned, as if in concentration.

"Thank you," said Jasmine.

Just moments later, the figure smiled “I recommend modern, but that you avoid ballet. I saw an opening on your schedule next week, and matched it with your preferences. Would you like me to book the 12pm class on Wednesday?”

“I’d love that”

“Booked. May the infinite flow of abu—”

“Thank you,” interrupted Jasmine, and swiped the figure away with a single gesture.

“Personalization isn’t all that bad,” she shrugged, turning to Kat, “but it’s going to get out of control”.

She guided Kat around the corner.

"By the way," she adding, turning to Kat "I'm sorry I didn't help you face your fear of heights earlier"

"No, it's okay," said Kat, brushing it off.

Jasmine grinned, and took Kat's hand.

She paused in front of a building that resembled a glass tube, with a spiral staircase inside it. Inside the staircase, a whirl of different colors of sand, some blues, greens, bronzes and glinting beiges, all poured down in a twisting pattern.

And on the outside, were chairs that looked like someone got strapped into.

Kat shuddered. "That's not funny," she said to Jasmine.

Jaz threw up her hands.

"It's your call. Your choice. We can take the stairs. There's 60 sets of them"

"Is this safe?"

"I promise, thousands of people have tried this. Look, kids getting strapped in!"

The attendants around the building wore white linen suits with swirling patterns of the same sand colors. They were, indeed, strapping in what looked like a pair of 10 year old boys.

"The odds of this killing me," said Kat, mocking the debate she'd just watched, "are roughly 6.3%, but that's a higher risk than I'm comfortable taking".

Jasmine laughed— "You're fitting right in!"

All humor abandoned Kat the moment they reached the front of a very short line, and the white linen attendants strapped her a seatbelt around her very, very nervous body.

"Three, two ---"

The seats shot upwards, luckily slower than Kat had anticipated.

"You can change how fast you go!" yelled Jasmine, already from above. "The controls are on your right!"

"None of these buttons pop me out right?" asked Kat, nervously, then realized Jaz couldn't hear her. Slow it was.

When they arrived at the top, there was another water dome like in the market, this time with the same swirls of sands pattern decorating the gentle waves. When Kat looked at the floor, her stomach turned in a wave, but then she recognized it was indeed solid. The same swirls of sand spun beneath an epoxy coating.

Kelsey waited for them at the top. Next to her, with dark blond hair and a shy smile stood Peter.

"We're switching here," explained Jasmine, "You and Kelsey and Peter will have dinner together. I wanted to take the ride up, and back down".

She hugged them both, then turned on her heel and left.

Kat looked at Peter, a tall, built out man with wavy brown hair, freckles and wire rimmed glasses. He beamed at her enthusiastically, and immediately opened his mouth to ask her something, then closed it.

Kelsey noted this with bemusement. "Peter, you remember my cousin Kat". Kelsey leaned in to hug her, and whispered, "Wait till we are seated to say anything, love."

Kelsey's ring vibrated, "Great, our table is ready, I'm starving".

Kelsey led them to a table in the back, and then pressed a few buttons on the table.

Suddenly all the ambient noise, the shuffling of plates and glasses and footsteps in the restaurant around them dulled down.

"Now we have privacy," Kelsey smiled.

"Kat, it is such a pleasure, and such an honor to meet you," gushed Peter, knocking over his water glass in a rush to shake her hand.

"Sorry about that", he said, mopping up, smudging the wet napkin over his forehead as well.

"It's my first time meeting someone outside of Mililac".

“Oh” said Kat, unsure of the right thing to say.

“Oh, do you not shake hands— where you’re from?”

“Oh, um, we do, sometimes”.

“Peter, you’re overwhelming her,” said Kelsey.

Peter shook his head, “My apologies, apologies, I’ve...never been outside of here, or really thought about it much, to say the truth. So, so, Kat— tell me about yourself”

“What do you want to know?”

“Everything, what you eat, how you dress, how your social customs and structure are designed”

“I’m sorry” frowned Kat,

Kelsey laughed.

Peter blushed. “I’m just very excited to know about your world,” he explained.

“Oh, it’s um,” Kat choked, she didn’t know where to start, “It’s normal, I mean, I guess”.

“I’m sure the words will flow to you at the right time, Kat” Kelsey butted in encouragingly, “We have time”

The table beneath them began to vibrate, and opened up to reveal small dishes with steaming dumplings upon them.

Kelsey immediately took a bite.

Kat tried to meet the assignment “Krall has nine districts,” she began, “and a few small neighborhoods in each of them, that are in a hierarchy. There’s Royals, Police, Engineering, Healthcare, Education, Market, Farming, Factory and Labor. The last ones really suck.”

“Which one were you in?” asked Peter

“Healthcare. It’s based on the family. But like the worst neighborhood,”

Kelsey interrupted,

“Do you mind if I record this?”

“No”, Kat replied, automatically.

Kels pulled out a tablet and started jotting some notes— “if I get this right, we could even build a replica of Krall as you speak”.

Kat’s cringed at the idea she was a bug under a microscope right now.

Peter raised an eyebrow.

“My apologies,” he said, “This is making you uncomfortable?”

Kat shot a look at Kelsey. “A little,” admitted Kat,

“I should have thought of that,” Peter admitted, to Kat and Kelsey both. “Why did you leave?”

“I, um, it was sort of, just a few things at once,” said Kat, lamely, worried she was about to start crying and draw attention, “I’d rather not talk about it”.

Both of them nodded. The table vibrated again, and a second course rose up.

"I don't know if I want to be known as the girl from Krall," Kat announced, "Not like, to you, but to everyone. Like, after we go to council".

Kelsey got a pained look on her face, "I understand what you're saying. I don't know. Maybe you can protect your privacy. But you also have a wealth of information within you, information that could be valuable to everyone here".

Kat nodded. "I can understand why you'd want to avoid that spotlight for sure," said Peter, "but there can be both. Maybe if you volunteer a lot of information, there will be a stronger case to protect your privacy".

"Yeah, there's no reason we couldn't have both" echoed Kelsey.

"By the way, Kels— { insert conversation in which Kelsey takes something/ has access to something that's still in prototype, and she doesn't think it's a big deal that she took it because her team is going to release it to the public in a few weeks anyway. It could be the recording app or something else, maybe the restaurant rez, open to ideas }

///Kelsey pressed an espresso into her hands. Kat took under breath, and took it another go.

177 days late night chapter

When she came home, Jasmine was saying goodbye to a woman with a bright, bubbling laugh who wore a flowery purple gown. They kissed each other on the cheek and held hands for a tender moment before departing.

As soon as she was out of sight, Jasmine's head sagged forward like a puppet. She welcomed Kat's arrival with a simple, "Care for a tub?"

Jasmine brought Kat to her water room, which hosted a huge tub with water that smelled of sandalwood.

That woman's name was Clara, Jasmine told her. Clara used to be her lover, her partner.

Jasmine's face seemed to age with melancholy. As she started the tub, she began mixing a tincture from the cabinet on the side.

One of those in every room , marveled Kat.

Kat learned that in Mililac, there was a principle called 177 days. The idea was, that if you worked on something— anything— whether it was a project, a business or a relationship— it should show improvement in 177 days. If after 177 days, there was no improvement, people were encouraged to let go.

"We tried," said Jasmine. She handed Kat a glass and took one herself.

"I was so excited to be with her. And she was too, with me! But almost as soon as we both agreed— there was this all pervasive feeling of not-enoughness. Everywhere. Like a void, all around us. It would come, it would leave for a moment, it came back. We really tried. Every counselor." She shook her head, "I really thought that we could work through it"

Jasmine and Clara had been together only for 17 days when they named the feeling. They spent the full 177 days trying to improve their partnership. They failed. On the 177th day, they held a ceremony on the iridescent rainbow bridge in front of the theater park, and parted ways, walking in opposite directions.

"She's moved on," told Kat, "she has a new girlfriend named Honey. I am dating too, Kat, I swear I am, but—"

Her voice cut off, as she turned to Kat teary-eyed.

"Sometimes I feel like I'm not from here. It's a normal feeling— they tell you from the age of 3 that everyone feels that way sometimes— but I mean it, Kat. I don't know. I don't know if everyone feels this as much as I do. They all have such an easy time letting go." She downed her glass, and turned to Kat, rueful "How can I miss something, that never worked in the first place? That was never really there?"

It was the most relatable thing Jasmine had said so far. Kat came closer and wrapped her arms around her new friend.

Chapter 6

taking heli, meeting Anna

The next day, after a particularly fluffy pancake breakfast, they took off to Verdant.

"What a great excuse to see Anna," Kelsey told Kat, "you'll love her"

Kelsey, Anna and Jasmine had all grown up together, in the same neighborhood. In her early twenties, Anna leaned towards Verdant, and eventually moved over.

"She lives in the Verdant plains, too, so it's a little trickier to get to her. We can take a heliplane, or we can ride horses".

"Definitely taking the heli!" said Jasmine, "If Kat got injured on a horse, that would cause all sorts of problems for us".

And it would also be a bit painful for me , thought Kat, but she bit her tongue. Instead, she asked,

"So, um. We've been telling people I come from Verdant. What do I tell people who like....are Verdant?"

"You know, I don't think Anna's going to ask. But you can say something really neutral, like outer forest. It's more normal to be shy around there".

"So we'll snag Anna, show Kat around— and then go to Verdant max— can we do all that in one day?"

"Well, a long one"

The three of them, along with Nico, rode the float to the end of a line labeled Verdant Plains. As they stepped outside onto a simple gravel platform, Kat saw rows and rows of little helicopter cars.

Jasmine pulled out her odd-looking doll and tapped some notes on her belly. One of the cars whirled on and floated about a foot or two above the others.

"That one is ours! Let's go!"

"Don't forget to take photos of it, we have to fix it if it breaks".

"Yeah, that's a whole thing— god knows it happens"

"Crazy they still let you drive," teased Kelsey.

"Crazy you still let me drive!" laughed Jasmine.

"Can I drive?" asked Kat, emboldened by their banter.

"Absolutely not," they answered, in unison.

"Sorry," said Kelsey. "Your chances of crashing it on the first few goes are a little high, and that's normally fine, but we can't deal with that process right now. Plus, you really should observe it at least once or a dozen times".

Jasmine shifted uncomfortably "The chances you crash are actually like under 3%, truthfully, Kat, but it's just a risk we can't take. Soon, no one will drive them because they'll all be automatic, and I'm a bit sad about that. We did get three top so that you can look out as well!"

The heli was shaped like a short triangle with a top that sloped back gently.

"You drive, Jaz. I've got Nico" said Kelsey.

"This is my favorite thing" smiled Jasmine, turning to Kat. "I remember when I learned to drive at the age of 15. I thought it was the best thing that ever happened to me. I'd go for rides over the Verdant planes and into the forest".

"— and crashed".

"Yeah", sighed Jasmine, nostalgically, "crashed a few times. Once into this big willow tree, with someone playing the flute underneath. Now I'm less likely to crash". She winked, "so less adventure".

"Seatbelts please", Kelsey said to Kat, "let me show you how to work that".

"We didn't need these in the float"

"Well, those move much slower". At that, the heli whirled into action and shot them up. Jasmine smiled, pressed a button, and added a thumping music to accent the experience.

"Okay, Kat, if you want me to slow down at ANY point, please say so. If you are feeling sick, or nervous, I want you to SAY something. This can be a good exercise in speaking your needs in a calm & confident manner".

"It should be fine," Kat murmured as she bit her lip.

"Niko is going to be a lot more vocal with his needs, I think", said Kelsey, raising her eyebrows as her son started to whimper.

Jasmine curved over a bunch of trees and moved inwards so they were right at the rim of the tallest ledge of trees in the forest.

Nico burst into giggles and hit his palms together.

"Way to go with those driving skills, Jaz", Kelsey marveled.

They moved between two lush mountains covered in greenery, and then the forest opened up into a series of plains.

Farmlands, accentuated by patches of trees in occasionally geometric and often completely random patterns stretched for miles and miles. They flew over orchards and vineyards and —

"...this is near where I found you with the papaya" noted Kelsey.

"Yeah, I wonder what would happen if I didn't find you".

"Yeah, part of me wants to ask Anna if she's ever met anyone," Jasmine added.

"Yeah, part of me wants to ask that, too", said Kelsey, nervously. "But I don't know if she can keep a secret".

As Jasmine steered the heli in a slow circle to the ground, aimed right at a woman with a small group of children all around her. She raised her arms, covered in plain linen cotton, up as soon as they stepped out the door,

Jasmine and Kelsey proceeded to bombard her with hugs, and pick up the kids in turn. It seemed like Kelsey's boy and one of Anna's daughters were close friends, and they ran off together immediately. That still left Anna with four kids by her side,

"Such a pleasure to meet you," said Anna, freckles shining off her tanned skin, "You're Kat?"

"Yes," said Kat, nervously prepared to field any number of questions, but instead Anna just said, "This is Zoran, my eldest, Iris, my second oldest, Mika just ran off with Nico, and these two are twins, Ela and Jade".

" Welcoming abundance," said Kat, hoping that was the right thing to say. She was armed with a response to why a close cousin of Kelsey's hadn't been introduced yet, but Anna didn't ask. She just gazed at Kat's eyes softly, a little longer than Kat was accustomed to.

"Such a pleasure to meet you," smiled Anna, "Let's get you comfortable. Won't you come in?".

Come in where , wondered Kat. Anna confidently led them over to a small set of trees, and only a few yards away did Kat realize there was a home camouflaged there.

Kat's next step brought her to a stepping stone shaped like a leaf, the first sign of building for a mile around. She took the steps up to a simple wooden log cabin, with walls that spiraled up into a cone. Vines covered half the structure, making it difficult to see from afar. "There's a leather cover," said Anna, "our neighbors make these beautiful ones, and hand painted, too. I can lower it if anyone gets cold " .

But just as she stepped into the doorway, Anna spun around,

"Jaz, take that out of your pocket" she snapped, "I know you have it. Disable it".

Jasmine sheepishly produced a small black box with a little indicator light on it, and pressed it off. Her face resembled a small child who'd just lost their ice cream cone.

"You know it's not permitted here" said Anna, in a tone that would have made anyone feel ashamed. Kelsey's eyebrows shot up at the exchange.

"What is it?" asked Kat, before she could help herself.

"Handheld PRF"

"It's a radiation field that kills the majority of mosquitos in a 5 foot radius," explained Anna, not bothering to hide her frustration, "They say it's just mosquitos, but how do they know? How did you think that I wouldn't know you had one? I can hear them. I can feel it! It's a complete disruption of the ecosystem."

Anna took a deep breath and placed her hands together. She exhaled slowly. Then, in a more compassionate voice, she offered, "I'll light some citronella for you, Jaz. I know they bother you here".

Jasmine raised her eyebrow and immediately swatted a mosquito at one of her shoulders.

Anna lit the fire with citronella in the middle of her space. Then she went over into the corner and brought over a jar to hand to Jasmine.

"It's the season, Jasmine, I know it's a little annoying. Try this lotion. I also have clothes I can lend you, you're wearing those little skirts of yours— let me grab you something".

Anna disappeared quickly, with her two little twins running after her, and came back with simple cotton clothing for Jasmine, long pants and a jacket made of linen.

"This will help, too. I'm sorry", she said, kissing Jasmine on the cheek.

Anna then set an iron pot in the grate over the fire and picked up a loaf of bread that looked nothing like the bread that they'd eaten in the city. She brought over some wooden chairs to a simple table. Kat was shocked. Anna lived like a country peasant.

"This is homemade by my friend Ivy", smiled Anna, with obvious satisfaction, "She has four kids, but she always has time to bake. Her bakery is doing quite well, it's her way of feeding the town. It inspires me".

Kat nodded.

Anna set out avocados, bananas, dragon fruit, cheese from five farms, and named every single person who had gathered these items. Kat hoped there wouldn't be a quiz later.

"We're up to 87% sustainability," she announced, "It's an honor to be one of the 10 families here. This collective has mass dinner twice a week, which is a lot to keep up with— but we're still going to the verdant min field dances— oh, Jaz, every time I'm there, I think of you, you should come out more."

Kat caught Kelsey's eye, and Kelsey said, "Anna, wanna tell Kat how you moved here?"

"Oh, it was almost 10 years ago now. I came out here alone, and then met my partner at one of the dances. We started off in a different collective, Hummingbird, but we've been a part of Dragonfruit for 4 years now. I'm an herbalist, so we've expanded the collective to have a whole apothecary".

Anna collected 5 simple wooden cups and pulled down a dark brown liquid from a jar on the second shelf. She poured the slightly terrifying, bubbling mix into the cups, and passed one to each person.

"In gratitude to the earth," she nodded. Kat took a sip of the slightly sweet and lightly sour liquid, noticing that as she did, a sense of calm started to fall over her. The room seemed a touch brighter.

"Miadana," said Anna, "a strong but gentle herb, mixed with a little cherise, washange, flor de pal, and lavender".

"It's lovely," said Kat, wondering if herbology was one of Anna and Jasmine's greatest ties.

"I hope you're hungry", added Anna, "I have two meals planned for us; one at home on our land, and then we'll head to the mountains for dinner. Do you want

to eat first or gather?"

"Eat" said Jasmine, just as Kelsey said "Gather". Anna laughed, and passed a beautiful purple fruit to a slightly disgruntled Jasmine, "enjoy this now, love. I'll show you where the rest grow".

Kat marveled as Anna packed a stroller with her two youngest children, the wheels looking like they came from a mini tracktor— "we got this so we can walk them around the farm". Every time she'd met someone so far— Kevin, or Zed— it felt like walking amongst landmines; what was her education, her opinion on the latest motion, which projects she'd been a part of. Anna didn't seem to need any of that.

"We raised this structure four years ago," said Anna to Kat, "I still remember how all our neighbors came over to help us build this space. It's such a better form of construction. Instead of disturbing the neighbors, you're working together and being welcomed by them".

"That is so beautiful," said Jasmine, "but to be fair, the printing process barely disturbs anyone nowadays"

"I guess, but it's still nice to have your home built by your friends. I feel like you'd really like it if you moved back here, Jaz, if you just gave it a real shot. The dance scene is spectacular".

Jasmine and Kelsey exchanged a look behind Anna's back.

Anna smiled, "you're really telling me you're happy? I can see it in your eyes, love. You think Ashe's really going to be liveable through the personalization project".

"I mean yeah, I'm a little concerned, yea" admitted Jaz.

"Have faith," said Kelsey, "I'm on five personalization committees, and leading three. I'm going to make sure these projects fit in with the aesthetic and culture of Ashe— personally," she winked.

"When we were 18," Anna told Kat, "right as you were being born, I think, they installed the first personalization bot outside the central library. Do you remember how we all stood in line for hours, literally baking in the sun, just for the chance to talk to this thing for 10 minutes?"

Kelsey laughed, "We were 18. We were hungry for the chance to wait in line for anything"

"And I'm finally standing there, looking at this thing, which at the time was just a screen projection, and it's my turn to talk. And I ...god, I don't even remember the questions I asked. It just struck me as so boring, so absurd, that we had all wasted the afternoon this way, to be recognized by a robot, when we could have been talking to each other."

"...you remember how it said to me "Hey, Kelsey, your bangs look a little messy today", retorted Kels, "I was a little annoyed by that introduction".

"Exactly! I mean, Ashe's cooked, it's about to become a video game. If it's not already".

"I know, I know it's crazy" replied Kelsey, rubbing her temples. "But trust me, Ashe's united. Everyone backs an integrated vision".

"I'll be here" shrugged Ana, then she ushered them outside.

"Now right over there is where the farm fields start."

Kat gasped. Along the rolling hills were beautiful mandalas of colors .

"I can't believe anyone used to lay out their vegetables in a line" said Kelsey, "poor little soldiers".

The mandalas stretched out for miles, some had vegetables, others flowers, many had foot paths almost like labyrinths inside them. Every now and then,

gigantic fruit trees sprinkled the landscape, with bulbous, purple melons and little pink bananas.

"Follow me", she said, pushing her stroller, and handing a pink banana each to her two daughters."

Anna walked right in and started plucking some vegetables into a basket. "Arugula, carrots, here's onions— garlic is towards the middle"

"Here we grow every herb that we need to treat, nothing derived or synthetic. You don't need it. I like the forest, too, Kat, you think you'll stay there?"

Kat snapped back from her awe of all the colors. She kept it vague, "Yeah," she said, "maybe".

"I'm sure you know a ton of people in min , but if you ever need , call me and I'll get you situated here".

"Thank you," smiled Kat.

Jasmine passed Kat part of the purple fruit Anna had just given her, it was as good as the very first bite of papaya she had, after a week of hunger.

Anna reached over and handed Kat a pink banana, and then went to give two to Kelsey. Kelsey's son was already running around, yelling, picking different leaves and begging Kelsey to notice him.

Kat felt her mind wandering, and she imagined living here, wandering the gardens and picking fruit each day. She had thought the vines and baskets in Jasmine's kitchen were impressive, but this was beyond. It was so open and expansive--

"damn it!" Jasmine swatted a mosquito away, "I swear they go for me first"

"It could be the refined sugar. Do you still eat sweets late at night the way we used to in school?"

"It is definitely more of a blood type thing." replied Jasmine.

"I've heard that people can change their blood type with the right diet—"

"I mean, that's an interesting idea," said Kelsey, clearly trying to keep the peace.

"There's a temple space and a dance space," said Anna, to Kat "to the right of the fields."

"Where?" asked Kat.

"Right over there. Maybe we need to come closer".

Again, Kat had been fooled— the large platform was camouflaged that it was impossible to see.

"Welcoming abundance," sighed Jasmine, with great relief. Citronella was burning in a great circle all around the space....

"This spot has the best climate, and the best view. At night," added Anna, "it does light up real nice. It's a little different in the Mountains. A bit more impressive. But it's all in the way you look at things. Have you done temple yet today?"

"Not yet," replied Kelsey.

"Okay, well, we'll go up for a few moments then".

Anna effortlessly pushed her children up the hill, where they were miraculously quiet. They looked over all of the fields & orchards as the gentle hum of nature

was all around them. Kat watched, mesmerized, as two brilliant blue butterflies danced with one another. Every breath smelled sweet, a blend of herbs and flowers that all merged together.

"I love it here" said Anna, softly smiling to herself. "Everyone wants to build a better world and no one notices the one in front of them. Except right here".

Anna's little girls ran up the hill and pressed flowers into her hands. She looked at the three of them teary-eyed.

Jasmine wrapped Anna in an embrace.

Kelsey put her arm around Kat, too, while Nico clutched her around her legs.

Kat shifted uncomfortably. All this focus on family was making her think of hers. She imagined herself living here, instead. Everything you could ever want to eat, the marvels of nature, and so many sweet people for company.

Really, what else was needed?

"Can we go inside?" whispered Jasmine, a few minutes later, not eager to end the moment. "I'm still getting bitten despite everything"

verdant mountains

"That's sage, fennel, comfrey"

Anna had a lecture for every plant, and Kelsey kept prodding Nico to pay attention.

Kat was familiar with most of these herbs, but half were curious discoveries.

“Try this one,” said Anna, pointing to a vine rich with thick pale disks of various sizes, running from pale green to bright orange. The smallest was the size of a coin, and the largest the size of a teaplate. “The brighter ones are the best,” she added, “they only grow here in min”.

Kat pulled at a bright orange disk nervously, but Kelsey grabbed on behind her and broke it in half. She followed suit.

A wrinkled orange ball the size of a walnut sat in the center.

“Let’s take these inside to boil” suggested Kelsey, before Kat could ask something stupid, like “how do I eat this thing?”

Anna reached into the carriage and produced three large sacks, “we will need all of this”.

Everyone dutifully filled the sacks with the strange little discs. Kat tasked herself with dragging one of the sacks back.

When they walked in, Anna set up three cutting boards, and put everyone to work again. Jasmine grabbed some nuts from a pantry to snack on, and offered some to Kat with an eye roll, “lunch is going to take forever,” she whispered in her ear.

“That’s for sure,” winked Anna, overhearing them, “I planted the corn myself three months ago. You could say the meal was three months in the making”.

Jasmine choked and grabbed a glass of water.

Kat frowned. She was used to people working hard for their food but this seemed different.

“Even the corn?” asked Kelsey, “Why? Main agriculture uses the bare minimum of pesticides, I’m surprised you were able to grow yours without it”.

“So they say. But this tastes better, doesn’t it?”

“Well I guess, you could say so”

After a pleasant lunch and catch up, they prepared for the short journey to the obscured mountains together.

"Pretend you've been there before," Kelsey had advised her earlier that day, "say that the Elven Garden is your favorite restaurant, or you went on a school trip to the mycelium factory. I'll back you up".

They walked over to what appeared to be random clearing in the woods. Suddenly, there was a whirling sound in the center, and Kat jumped. From the middle of the clearing, the head of a gigantic brown mushroom grew, until it was the size of a large SUV .

Everyone calmly climbed onto the carpet fungus like nothing strange was happening at all. Kat fingertips confirmed the texture of a real mushroom, or a stealthy fake. Kat raised her eyebrows at Kelsey.

The mushroom seemed to know exactly where it was going as it weaved its way through the forest, successfully dodging trees as Kat tried to hide her concerns about a crash.

They got closer and closer to some beautiful ridged mountains in the distance. Anna patted the mushroom three times, and it stopped.

Kat frowned. There was no way that was natural. But, principles could probably be excused for such a statement piece.

They stopped at a path that mimicked the Mililac sidewalks Kat had become accustomed to, and the lavender that grew on the sides. The path came up right to the edge of a gigantic mountain.

"Market first?" asked Anna.

"Of course," replied Jasmine.

Kat was slightly confused about the plan here. They walked right up to the foot of one of the gigantic, towering mountains, and Jasmine reached out her hand to touch a steeper edge.

Kat heard clicks and turns. The moss surrounding Jasmine's hand began to grow away, opening up a set of carved wooden doors.

"Kat, after you" said Kelsey, mischievously.

Kat projected confidence as she pushed forward, bringing them into a large wooden corridor, curved and lit with what appeared to be candles.

"Are those candles?", she asked before she could stop herself.

Anna heard the concern in her voice, "No, dear, it's the long lasting burners, remember? But remember, the ceiling here breathes, so the air will be just fine".

Kelsey shot Kat a look, like "ask nothing else", as they moved through the wooden hallways spotted with patches of stones and crystal. It seemed like they were in a polished mine.

"It's so pretty" she whispered to Jasmine, who giggled.

The corridor opened up to a gigantic dome that looked like it was a hundred trees all curling their branches inwards to a circle at the top. In the circle appeared the open sky— or was it the open sky? They had just been in a mountain, Kat had seen it from the outside. How could it be the open sky? It was the same climate as outside.....

The sky-seeming thing also peeked in through various gaps in the trees. Kat couldn't understand how it worked but it looked quite real.

The floor was moss with mushrooms and lichen coming out of it, little patches of flowers grew everywhere. All around the main space were wooden spheres where people sat and ate meals; all of it had an ethereal look. The plain wooden design followed leaflike and organic patterns, with occasional mosaics and fractals washed over the wood.

In the center was a tall waterfall bubbling in all directions, with a railing that didn't seem to protect anything, just holding hundreds of cups hanging.

Jasmine walked over, grabbed a cup from the wooden rail and dipped in the water. "Kat, do you want some?," she asked, "It's sparkling!"

"Pardon, are you Jasmine Coulet?" asked a woman, who looked Jasmine up and down with a look Kat couldn't tell was awe, or disdain.

"I'm a fan of your designs. But I can't bring myself to wear any, because of the chemical presence in your dyes, and your use of plastics"

"I'm sorry," Jasmine frowned, "I mean no offense, but my designs aren't possible without that,

"Forgive me, I didn't mean to trap you in insufficiency", replied the woman, " I only meant to express faith that you would find the resources . Your visions are beautiful".

"Thank you," said Jasmine, begrudgingly, as the woman walked away.

"She loves this," joked Kelsey in Kat's ear.

"Let's scope out the Verdant designs", said Anna, "it might cheer Jasmine up".

Anna motioned them over, and they made their way through the throng, over to a simple dress shop.

Kat examined the Verdant designs. They were simple, soft, cotton. This was the closest thing she had seen to clothing that looked like home. The dresses tended to be long, flowing, with open arms and the pants similarly spacious. Linens and dramatic cuts dominated. There were a few fairy-like shorter dresses every now and then.

Kat thought the designs were rather lovely.

They turned a corner into another shop, this one more colorful. Tie dyed fabrics abound, with beautiful whirls of color.

"These are gorgeous!" exclaimed Kat.

"A little dated," whispered Jasmine.

"This one is pretty," said Kelsey, pulling up a thin crown that was bedazzled with beetle wings.

"Why don't you use these?" Kat earnestly asked Jasmine.

"I do," said Jasmine, "but they only come in one color and beetles are quite rare. I would have had to create my own beetle farm."

"Possible and probable! I'm sure you could find plenty eager to help you in Verdant," said Anna, "If you had natural designs you could open up another shop here"

"I'll think about it," Jasmine placated.

They turned the corner into another mossy enclave, which had fruit hanging from a tree.

"This is so surreal", Kat whispered to Kelsey, using one of the words she had taught her recently.

Kelsey smiled, "I love the moss everywhere. But it can only happen in places with low foot traffic, like this corner. I really thought there was more hope! I forgot to add that I lost Verdant support when I wanted to genetically engineer the moss, but I was biting off more than I could chew".

Exactly as Kelsey had said, the moss became less populous as soon as they entered into another large, cavernous space. This place looked like a gem grove, the inside of a cave. Beautiful, mystical, and a little dark.

"This was the original cave that inspired the construction of the Verdant mountains. It was a controversial project and not everyone was behind it. I heard that half of Min stayed home, including most of the community I live in now. The use of dynamite to create other openings was dangerous and unkind. The second two inhabited mountains were constructed from scratch, which was less violent but also many people deemed it unnatural."

"How did you feel about the project?" asked Kat, as Kelsey beamed approvingly behind her.

"Oh, sweetie, I've learned not to judge the past~ this was before my grandmother's time! There was simply more to build back then ~ but now I feel like we are overdoing it. I speak out against the expansions. But I think I would have been for it back in the day, we needed somewhere for the kids to go to school when it's raining. It's nice to have somewhere to go"

A beautiful man walked by, with long black curls, half of which were pulled back into dreadlocks. He took a double take upon seeing their group—

"Jasmine! Always good to see you!" he exclaimed, with a small bow.

Jasmine smiled, "it's been a while".

"I'm Pearl" he said, offering a hand to Kelsey and Kat. "Anna knows me, I helped raise her house".

"And grateful we are" smiled Ana, "I forgot you and Jasmine were close".

Pearl blushed, as if he wasn't sure about that.

Kat thought he was really beautiful. He was dressed in an upscale Verdant, with little ferns adorning the buttons on his vest.

"We were about to get dinner in the cavern," said Jasmine, "would you care to join us?"

Running into Pearl seemed to improve Jasmine's mood. Kelsey winked at Kat behind her back.

They sat down at one of the wooden benches around the carved rock tables. The table seemed dirtier than anything she'd seen in Mililac so far.

A waiter came by, and dropped a scoop of burning embers on the table.

Kat yelped. "It's okay," said Pearl, "they startle me sometimes, too. It's best not to touch them, but they do make the table glow. That's one of the benefits of this rock, is that it won't burn. They let the embers die out for light, and then brush off the ashes afterwards."

It was very kind of him to say all that, Kat thought, as he could have thought she was crazy for being so scared.

"If it makes you uncomfortable" smiled Pearl, "you can always douse it out with the water fountain on your right". He pointed to a small stream that fell out of a pile of rocks, where someone had struck a seashell.

"Do you want to watch the food cook, or have it served from the kitchen?" Anna asked the table.

It felt odd to Kat that anyone would want to watch food cook over hot stones, at a restaurant. Maybe when you don't have to do your own cooking all the

time.

"From the kitchen would be nice".

It was a little hard to hold a conversation with the perfect-looking Pearl.

"How do you know Jasmine?" she asked, only to watch him blush again.

"We met 4 or 5 years ago, I think" said Jasmine, "back when I lived in Verdant —Pearl and I were dance partners for a while. We went to a festival together once".

"You lived in Verdant?" said Kat

"Just for six months!" said Jasmine

"I think you should have stuck it out a little longer," said Anna, shaking her head, "it was nice having you around".

Kat felt confused, about Jasmine's weird relationship with Verdant, and her weirder relationship with Pearl. Jasmine seemed...if anything a little bit more distant than usual. She was warm, but polite. Kat wondered what had happened. Pearl seemed too pretty to keep at an arms length.

"It's so funny that I haven't seen you around," said Pearl, turning to Kat.

"I'm sure you must have," said Jasmine, putting her hand on Pearl's shoulder, "So what have you been up to since the past year or so?"

Pearl became distracted by telling Jasmine about a plan to carve out a fourth mountain as an indoor wellness space, the arguments for and against, and a silent retreat he'd attended recently. They all fell into a conversation discussing deforestation in the region and how to combat it.

"I'm getting a little weary with all the talk," said Jasmine, "what's happening tonight? Any singing, dancing we could swing by?"

"Of course," said Pearl, smiling, "everyday".

He led all of them down the sparkling hallways into a large wooden hall, filled with hundreds of dancers. All around the perimeter sat statues of half human, half animal creatures, in poses of exaltation and joy.

In the center was a group of musicians, singing words that Kat couldn't understand,

"Is that a different language?" Kat whispered to Kelsey.

"It's made up. It's a channel"

Whatever that meant.

Jasmine grabbed Pearl's hand, and danced into the crowd. Kelsey grabbed Kat's, and dragged her in the opposite direction of Anna, who was distracted by a group of young mothers.

Once Kat was at the very back of the dance hall, she said,

"Hey, remember those stretches Jaz does every morning? Can you lay here and try to do some of them? The ground is soft. I'm nervous about you dancing, or being too close to Anna and not knowing the songs. She might notice something odd then. Now, she'll just assume you need a moment to reflect"

Kat nodded.

"I'm going to go back to Anna so it doesn't look weird"

So Kat sat on the floor, and watched for an hour as dancers whirled and toppled all over each other. As waves of song went throughout the whole dance hall. Several other people came to sit near her, or lay on the floor. This was her favorite place she'd seen so far.

Eventually Kelsey came back, and said, "we're going to start to head home, ready?"

Kelsey, Jasmine and Anna wandered back through the curving halls of the mountains. Pearl wasn't with them anymore and Jasmine offered no explanation. Kat paid attention to the variety of crystals that grew out of odd spots in the walls.

In a nook, Kat marveled at a small group of musicians playing a large circular harp together. A nostalgic, bittersweet melody emerged. They were right in the middle of the walkway, and people had begun to sit down all around them to watch.

"Let's stay," said Jasmine, transfixed as the singer's tale unfolded.

"Most music per capita," said Anna proudly, gesturing around her, "Don't forget it, Jaz"

"I know" she said, her eyes glazed over, "it's beautiful".

They pulled some cushions down from the nooks in the walls, and created an audience in the walkway. Apparently this wasn't a surprising thing. The passage became so crowded, that anyone coming through had to choose between weaving themselves up and over the audience, or give up, sit down and listen. Most newcomers chose the latter.

Kelsey tapped something onto her tablet, and passed it to Kat, with a look that implied she should read it furtively.

"All the rooms are booked by other bands tonight. So sometimes groups just set up in the hallways at night. The only place it's banned is the medical mountain."

Kat snickered. It was sort of funny how Kelsey just *needed* to explain what's up.

"Don't be jealous of our secrets, Anna," Kelsey teased when Anna looked up.

Now everyone was singing together, a simple melody,

"Evening of the stars,

Time to live is large,

Dreams are but a journey"

As the concerts came to a close, they picked themselves back up and wandered away with Anna.

"You could stay the night," she said, "I have four beautiful guest hammocks, they are right under the stars. I could set up a net for the bugs; I have clothes for sleeping"

"I would love to, Anna" said Kelsey, "Truly I would. But I need to get Nico back to his father".

"Of course, my love," Ana nodded, "but what about you, Kat? Won't you stay? It's beautiful at night".

Kat would have loved to. Every part of her longed to lay underneath the stars, to eat the sweet purple fruit and listen to the music of the mountains in the distance.

Jasmine shot her a look of alarm.

"I can't", she told Anna, not wanting to upset Jasmine. "I have a commitment" Jasmine told Anna, as she hugged her, "I would love to come some other time."

After all the respective hugs, they climbed back onto the mushroom, and then back the heli and Kelsey flew them home.

jasmine bath binge

When Jasmine opened the door of her home, she immediately ran to the bath room and began to pour hot water into the tub. Kat caught up to her, watching her pour rose oil & bubbles into the tub with a freneticism. Upon noticing she was watched, Jasmine turned her to and said,

"I'm going to order some sweet sushi. Do you want any?" she shook her head, not bothering to Kat's reply, "You know what, I'll just get us a little of everything."

She tapped the control pad on the kitchen counter a few times, and some of the soft, tender music she loved began to hum from her whole home,

"Ordered!"

Jasmine then began to strip down to her clothes with the same freneticism, and get in the tub.

"Oh my god," she sighed, as she got in the water. Kat wanted to roll her eyes. It's not like she just escaped a war zone.

"Do they not have hot water in Verdant?" she asked.

Jasmine grabbed a loofa and began to scrub enthusiastically, "Well, not everywhere. In the hot springs, and in the mountains. But in verdant min, not always. It runs out fast. Many people don't even bother trying. They don't *need* it".

She empathized the word *need* with great contempt.

"You know, before today" said Kat, slowly, "I would have thought you were Verdant, or at least that you'd be comfortable there".

"Common misconception," grumbled Jasmine, then dipped her head under the water. Rising, she said "I think our sweets will be here soon. Can you snag them? Then do you want to join me?"

The doorbell rang with the sound of several sweet birds and Kat went to pick up the sweets.

Unveiling them before Jasmine, she saw a shocking array of luxurious concoctions, looking like sushi with slices of mango, preserved oranges and raspberries on sweet rice. Some were even dusted in gold.

She brought them up and Jasmine grabbed a floating tray with ornate chopsticks.

"You really don't mind the bugs?" she asked with incredulity.

"It seems like a small price to pay to be so close to nature," Kat answered honestly, as she began taking off her own clothes to get into Jasmine's whale sized tub.

"They all bite me, I'm their favorite."

"Maybe Anna is right, maybe it's the sweets".

"It's not," snapped Jasmine, "It's a blood type factor. But also, Anna doesn't believe that blood types are even real."

Jasmine paused, "I wish I was happy in Verdant, Kat," she admitted, "I agree with everything they say— or most of it— theoretically, but they are so perfectly satisfied. Anna gets up with the sunrise. Every day."

There was a silence that Kat didn't know how to break. Jasmine stepped out, and made them each a cocktail of herbs from her apothecary. Kat noticed the glasses weren't even, as Jasmine handed her the lighter one.

"What happened with you and Pearl?" she asked.

"Pearl is sweet. He's a very special person. I don't know. It just didn't seem to flow after a while." She paused, taking a sip "I wouldn't mind if you were sweet on him,"

Kat blushed. "Who wouldn't be?" smiled Jasmine. "I saw that you wanted to stay, I'm sorry. I couldn't let you stay by yourself, even in Verdant they'll ask questions eventually. Pearl would have asked about your background for sure. And I wanted to come home."

Kat didn't know what to say to that. She decided to change the topic "Jasmine, can I ask you something strange?"

"Anytime, love"

"Are you happy?"

Jasmine gave her a strange look. "I don't know. I think so. Often. Sometimes I'm ecstatic. But I don't think it's that important to be happy."

"No?" said Kat, surprised.

"I think there's really something to being free".

Chapter 7

jasmine's menty b

The next morning, Kat found herself alone on Jasmine's deck. It was harder staying focused without Jasmine, so she ended up wasting an hour asking questions on the control panel. Kelsey arrived, and the two of them had already sat down to breakfast when Jasmine walked in, groggy-looking.

"Good morning, my loves. Temple, please, and right away"

"Do we have time? I thought you wanted an early start on Lagos," said Kelsey.

"Kels, I don't want to deal with the pricks in Lagos today. Verdant was enough."

"I'm sure you have it in you"

"No, I don't" snapped Jasmine, frustration pouring out of her tone.

Kelsey paused and looked up. "What's up with you?"

Jasmine did look worse for the wear. Come to think of it, realized Kat, it was odd she missed her morning practice. Jasmine looked from Kat to Kelsey for a moment, then shook her head and looked at the floor.

"I think I'm spiraling a little," she said, finally.

Kelsey arranged herself in an alert position, gazing upon Jasmine softly.

"What's going on?"

"I feel a little jittery. I went through the roster of our orders coming for dresses last night, and it's lower than last season"

"It's always low every fall right?"

"It's a lot lower this fall! I think the bad publicity through Verdant writers...and if the orders are low, then some of our resources will be reapportioned-

"That would be disappointing," nodded Kelsey, "but I'm sure it would pick up"

"What if it didn't?"

"Oh, Jaz, how much lower?"

"12 orders"

"Is that so bad?" Kelsey frowned, trying to understand her friend's disposition. Kat was silent. Seeing Jasmine without her usual confidence was a bit odd.

"I don't want to lose the shop, Kels. Even the home I live in, it's allocated to Ashe designers".

"Jaz, you've had it for 13 years"

"And every year we are doing more with less, and it's down to the bone."

"I hear you," said Kelsey, gently.

"When my mother was my age," Jasmine, continued "she was reportioning her resources, because she had too many"

"Times were different then, and you know, you could also think of that as a resource distribution fault, actually"

"Times are always different," Jasmine shook her head, "I'd probably fall behind in every version."

Kelsey frowned.

"Is this really about the shop?"

"It's all I have, Kels," cried Jaz, her tone raising in pitch and urgency, "I don't have anything else going on"

"Jaz, you're spiraling. If you want something else, just name it".

Kat shifted uncomfortably, Jasmine's shrill voice seemed to be freezing something inside her. Part of her wanted to walk away, but she knew she wouldn't.

"You have Peter," Jasmine gestured to Kelsey, "and Anna, has everyone, like a whole army, and I just have my shop, I should have worked harder--"

"Jaz, you're spiraling", Kelsey said, in a stronger voice.

Jasmine took a deep breath and put her hand on her head. "I might be spiraling."

"You're spiraling".

"Come here," said Kelsey. Jasmine sat on the couch and Kelsey hugged her. "Even if you lose the shop, which I don't think you will, you have me. What happened that set you off last night?"

"I don't know"

"Was it seeing Pearl?"

"I don't know"

"I was always curious why you guys didn't work out"

"Kels, I don't KNOW"

Kat couldn't be quiet any longer, "Kelsey, I don't think it's helpful to ask her more questions",

"Copy" replied Kelsey, "But I still think it's best to ask her what she wants to do"

Jasmine began laughing, and burst through the tension "Okay, here's what I want— how would you feel about changing the course of today's day, to see the core temple?"

core temple

"I called Lydia, she'll sit with me", said Jasmine.

"That's really sweet, she came out at the last minute. She's enabling you a little there tho,"

"Yeah. Yeah, I know".

Lydia, Kat learned, was a companion that Jasmine looked up to. Lydia spent her career in the temple and the healing arts.

"She's not scared of death," whispered Jasmine to Kat as they approached the temple, "not the way that I am. She's at peace with it. I want to be like that one day."

That, Kat thought, was one of the most unhinged life goals that she had ever heard of.

The sidewalk path to the core temple became increasingly ornate, with tropical flowers, roses and wisteria blossoming in large swaths on the paths.

A small creek crossed their path, just large enough you couldn't jump over it.

Kelsey took off her shoes and placed them on the banks.

"Leave these here"

Jasmine and Kat followed suit. Kelsey's boy was in preschool today.

The land on the other side of the creek was damp, and as they moved forward, a centimeter of water seemed to flood everything.

Kat observed cones of fire start to pour out of the water.

"Kels, how does that work?"

"Optical illusion. The water never reaches above one centimeter, but it reflects the fire so it seems like it reaches all the way down. Also, kerosene and lycopodium. They are tended to every four hours. No more talking, Kat"

The opalite, lightly sparkling sidewalk dominated the floor here as everywhere, but now the colors swirled with gold in the center.

The optical illusion sure worked on Kat, she stared at the fire pouring out of the water mesmerized, immersed, in awe and nothing else.

Her worries seemed so far away that she felt an urge to just lay down.

They approached a circular structure, with open walls and about 12 different marble pillars.

She climbed wet stairs, stepping on some nonslip guard rail.

Even though Kelsey wasn't speaking, Kat imagined her describing the pros and cons of flooding the temple with water and fire, quite eloquently. She could almost hear her having a debate about it with Peter.

She began to hear a gentle hum as she climbed the stairs. Kat caught a glimpse of a waterfall bubbler.

The pale purple waterfall flowed so gently over its spiral structure. Light came in from all directions and reflected off its water.

Water fell around all the walls of the temple, a thin stream that appeared to move in slow motion. It vibrated hundreds of strings, on the inside of the pillars.

The result was a shimmering sound that was absolutely trance inducing.

"Ask for only a little," whispered Kelsey, in her ear.

"Jasmine, and friends", a woman with an adoring smile, bright blue eyes and beautiful white curls. She was covered in purple robes, with tassels that shimmered after her. She embraced Jasmine and took a long, assessing look at her, the kind that family gives you.

"I'm glad you called me, dear. What's going on?" she asked.

"Just the usual," said Jasmine, her tone exasperated, "a bout of scarcity. You know, my favorite thing".

Lydia smiled.

"When did it start?"

"Truthfully, it was a few weeks ago. Just a gentle creep. I used my chanting, and my daily exercises. And my dance practice."

"But you're still spiraling."

"Yeah"

"That happens. It's very human to doubt yourself, you know that, Jasmine. You just need to learn to be kind to yourself in those moments".

"I'm trying"

"But you're tired"

"Yeah."

"I don't want you to confuse the medicine with the lesson. Can we commit to three integration sessions?"

"Yes"

"Then maybe our journey today will help. Is everyone ready to be in meditation for 2 or 3 hours?"

Kat panicked. 2 or 3 hours? She had found temple to be pretty unbearable for half an hour a day. 2-3 hours seemed horrific. Kelsey squeezed her hand, gently, and smiled at her.

It was sort of violating, Kat though, how attuned everyone is here .

Lydia turned to Kat, and smiled, "and how are you feeling, dearie?"

"Good," squealed Kat, desperately trying to get her voice to match the smooth, even tones of the Mililacers around her. "Normalcy in abundance"

"I see," said Lydia, raising her eyebrows. She looked her over for another moment and Kat tried to keep her heart from racing, "I hope you feel safe to show more of yourself soon. May that measure of abundance reveal itself for you."

"Thank you," said Kat. Lydia turned her gaze on Kelsey, much to Kat's relief. Her gaze had been the most penetrating of anyone who'd looked at her for a week. But she didn't know her story. She probably just noticed she was more insecure than everyone else. Except maybe Jasmine right now.

"And you, Kelsey, is it time for you again?" asked Lydia

"I think so," said Kelsey, "I haven't been back for four or five years I think."

"I think you should pause for a moment, and consider whether you are doing this for yourself, or for Jasmine."

"It's for me"

"As long as you are sure, love"

"Pardon," said Kat, her voice full of the telltale strain of someone trying to conceal their panic, "is there a restroom here I can use before we dive into a two or three hour meditation session?"

"I'll come with you," said Kelsey, with a tone of urgency.

Kelsey led her down the steps towards one of nearby structures.

"Okay, important notes," Kelsey whispered, "we are going to drink something, Kat, and it's going to make you feel a little different".

"Didn't we do that yesterday?"

"I mean sure, but, this is just going to be a little stronger. It's pleasant. I should have told you, we're just dumb and forget you don't know. You don't have to take it. But I think you should. You won't be hungry for a few hours."

"Could I get sick?"

"I don't think so. I mean, there's a chance you could get sick at any moment—sorry, that probably isn't very helpful. No. Probably not! Probably not is the best I can do, okay."

"It's fine," Kat reassured Kelsey.

A few minutes later, they walked back up.

Lydia distributed three cups to the women. "First, we are going to meditate for a short season. I will sit with you."

A short season? t hought Kat.

What was a short season? Seasons were four months, but surely we weren't going to be sitting for that long. I didn't even know if this place had all four seasons, because the climate seemed more temperate.

But we have to sit in temple space, again. Kat wanted ice cream. She also was very curious what they were going to do after the session, and she was curious, or rather terrified about how her family was faring without her. She thought about her mother and trembled. She must be so scared. It was true that she hadn't allowed herself to really think, to feel into that consequence. But yes, she must be scared, or horrified. That was a fact.

Kat sat and wallowed in guilt for many more minutes. Creeping in, between her anxious thoughts, were some shameful judgements of Jasmine. What was her problem?

She was so charming when you met her, preaching virtues of harmony and balance, but at night she became a pit of need. Why would anyone be so dissatisfied in the most beautiful of places? Maybe that's what Jasmine knew about herself; maybe that's why her relationships didn't work out.

Kat noticed that was a very weird thought for her to have. Was that her even her thought, or Jasmine's?

"It's time, my dears" said Lydia.

She indicated they could now drink the cups. Kat swallowed the honey sweet liquid that seemed more refreshing than anything she'd ever drank before.

Nothing happened. She took some deep breaths, and tried to focus on the sensations of the room around her, the music, the water, the scent of wisteria coming over her.

What if nothing happens? And she was just stuck here for the next three hours. Not the worst place to be stuck. But her belly growled. Kelsey had insisted they show up a little hungry.

Suddenly her heart began to beat a little faster, and her skin felt flushed. *Something is happening* though Kat.

Kat felt a strange sensation in her heart, almost as if she was being stretched open.

Jasmine was terrifying, thought Kat. It was so scary to imagine that someone who had as much as her;

safety,

food,

warmth,

air conditioning,

social standing,

a whole apartment,

a store of her own— or maybe you could call it a gallery,

friends,

the ability to rent and fly a heli,

It made Kat's head spin thinking of all of the things that Jasmine had. *And she had more than this* realized Kat, *she had her creativity* .

And Kelsey. Kat was so very very grateful to Kelsey. Kelsey was the kindest and smartest person that Kat had ever met. How lucky Kelsey must feel when watching her boy play on streets her grandmother and grandfather designed.

She felt Lydia place her hands on her shoulders, and heard her take a deep breath. "Go inside yourself," she advised calmly, "take some time to reflect on your own gifts".

My gifts thought Kat *what were my gifts?*

She had a gift for getting in trouble, and then getting out of it. That was one. And a gift for being in the right place, at the right time, that had worked for her somehow.

That's how she had met Travis. She had just been standing outside at the exact moment he came out, and their eyes locked.

If that happened again, thought Kat, I would be more likely to turn away now. I wouldn't want to run into someone like Travis again. That's the hardening of the

heart. That's getting older.

Travis. Kat felt pangs in her heart thinking about him. He had just disappeared. Kat wondered if he missed her, if he thought about her, or if he had just met the next girl. She wouldn't know, and she would never know here. And she may never come back. Sometimes she wondered if something terrible had happened, and he was trying to protect her. Or maybe that awful old whore was right.

Maybe he had doubts, too. Maybe he felt he couldn't actually change Krall, to put into practice the things they had dreamed about. Or was it only that Kat had dreamed about them, and Travis just nodded?

Maybe he had just agreed with everything she said. Or was it the other way around? It seemed fuzzy now.

But she was here, because of him, thought Kat. One way, or another, she wouldn't have run away if she hadn't met the old whore. And what that grizzled woman said wouldn't have bothered her so much if she hadn't met Travis.

Yes, if she hasn't met Travis, she might be working now, taking an apprenticeship somewhere. She would have been working all day.

But now she was here. And apart from Dididak, she hasn't done any real work. Instead she was resting on silken sheets and eating fruit sushi and five course meals prepared by chefs that educated her on the origin of each ingredient.

Instead, she was in this temple. The resonance of the temple seemed to get louder and pulse through her body. *She was here*. And she had gotten here, one way or another.

She took a deep breath and noticed how much sweeter the air felt than usual. *What a joy it is to breathe* though Kat. And especially here.

There is so much air, her heart called out

There is so much air, here for everyone,

Almost like a song,

So much air, and so much sound through the air

And so much water!

Kat looked down at her feet and watched the thin layer of perfectly temperature water run over them.

She wondered if she could bring her friends here. Maybe she could bring Jane, or her mother, her father, or Ben. She imagined walking them down the avenues, stopping for figs and pomegranates at the corner.

Maybe she could bring everyone here.

She was the first one, wasn't she? Maybe she could start a revolution. She felt a burst of gratitude in her heart, maybe that was her destiny. Yes, surely that was it...

If she could come here, if she could belong here, she could pave the way...

She closed her eyes and felt deeper into the hum around her, and heard an otherworldly voice, whisper

Look at the light streaming in, reflecting off one another, the way that we reflect off one another.

Kat took another deep breath to try to remember this feeling forever. Were her eyes supposed to be closed? It was such a gift to have them open.

She looked over at Kelsey, who, as if she knew she was being watched, opened her eyes and met her gaze.

Wow. She wanted to say through her eyes at Kelsey. Wow, wow, wow.

Kelsey's gaze was soft and she breathed gently, smiling softly. *Welcoming abundance* she thought to Kelsey.

Welcoming abundance.

For a few minutes, or hours, or not sure how long, Kat just felt her breath and listened to the resonance of the temple, falling into her body's comfort in the temperate climate and the water falling around them.

Suddenly the water in the center fountain shifted; instead of being transparent as expected, it became almost opaque, a mirror reflection of the environment and the music, trumpets, were calling from all directions.

The sunset had started and Kat watched a myriad of pinks and purples appear and fade to nothingness. How long had they been here for? Nothing seemed real outside of this sunset. She thanked every deity and atom, everything known and unknown, that had allowed her to be here to see this.

Thank you, thank you, and thank you.

The water at their feet had dried up, and the cushions they sat on, and the stone beneath them, continued to feel warm, and comforting.

The fountain faded and for a moment Kat thought her heart would break before — in a flash, fire. Fire ruled the fountain.

Candles arrived, somehow, throughout the structure and along all the paths.

"Welcoming abundance," said Lydia.

"Let's go dancing," replied Jasmine.

music & dance after

Jasmine touched the petals of every flower back down the path.

Kat and Kelsey smiled at each other, then followed suit. Every time Kat looked into Kelsey's eyes, she swore they beamed at her with so much love it was overwhelming.

She willed herself to reflect it a million fold; may Kelsey always know how grateful she was to her.

Kelsey took Kat's hand in hers, and Kat noticed how surprisingly gentle she was.

Jasmine whirled around and took Kat's other hand, "Kat, you're so beautiful— I will make you something this week, just you wait," she promised, "That was a good temple session, wasn't it?"

She started to skip, so Kat and Kelsey had no choice but to keep up with her.

"And the night has just started," Jasmine continued to muse, "Have you ever thought about how much there is to dance about?"

Kat raised her eyebrows at Jasmine.

Kelsey's eyes were embers, soft, inviting, infinitely deep, but Jasmine's were explosive. It was like something inside her was crawling to get out in all directions; she was a glowing, spinning ball of energy who ran over to a nearby stream of water and threw off her shoes.

"How amazing it is to be alive," she sang, dancing in the water.

Kat joined her voice, grateful for the permission. She felt perfectly poised between the two polar sets of friends, between Kelsey's poise and Jasmine's indulgence.

Kelsey came by and stroked her hair.

"Why doesn't everyone just come to core temple all day long, every day, if it can make you feel this way?"

"It doesn't really work like that," replied Kelsey, "If you came back tomorrow, you wouldn't feel really different. You would have to wait for years to feel a dramatic shift. So the longer you wait, the more interesting the experience. And, if you come too often, it can make you sick. I haven't been back since a year before I gave birth."

"There's a beautiful birthing center," Kelsey added, "it was just opened when I was nine months pregnant. Well, technically, not really, it wasn't supposed to be open yet, but I just preapproved it for a "trial" because, well, I was on the committee and I was pregnant, you know"

"We get to go wander the streets!" interrupted Jasmine, her exuberance getting the best of her. She was so childlike now, that glow emanating from her, "I want to go to all my favorite places"

"Didn't you tell Lydia that you'd rest?" asked Kelsey.

Jasmine took both of her hands and hers and pressed them to her chest, "we are so protected, my love, protected by everyone in this city. And there is so much music, so much to show Kat. How could we not?"

She dropped Kelsey's hands a little childishly; "let's walk, it feels so good to walk, and it smells so nice. I want to take deeper and deeper breaths".

Jasmine chatted for much of the walk, all the new designs that came to her, how she wanted to be part of a temple renovation one day, all of the resources

that she had that she hadn't even realized, how grateful she was for everyone in her life.

"How long does this last?" asked Kat, starting to become a little skeptical.

"Oh our whole lives, if we are lucky"

Kat's cynical mind, which had abandoned her for a good few hours, was starting to come back, faintly . She felt good, better than she had felt in her whole life, maybe, but she could tell that the other two were a little further from the earth.

In the distance she heard brass and horns.

"A concert" yelped Jasmine! "Aren't we lucky?! Oh there's an open air show now. Let's skip again, I like to skip"

Kat took a look around, and much to her surprise, she noticed all sorts of ecstatic behavior. Full grown adults were rolling around in the grass barely a quarter of a mile from the temple, and she observed a few people singing in the trees a few miles off. Where she was from, that kind of behavior could get you jailed; or at least it was a target on your back.

But here, people walked purposefully and people walked aimlessly. It didn't really matter, she thought. It's one and the same.

"This wasn't intentional," said Kelsey. "To build this conservatory so close to the temple. Now there's brass bands with every sunset. It sort of just happened that way."

"I'm surprised you didn't try to claim credit" nipped Jasmine.

"Low blow," laughed Kelsey.

They walked towards what appeared to be a circular stage. There was a structure that looked like a wave, with little carved out panels.

The musicians in the orchestra all sat on one of the panels or protrusions in the wave.

It produced an extraordinary effect.

"They can't all see each other!"

"They can", said Kelsey, pointing to another reflective wave ahead of them
"This way is better because you get to see everything at once, but it's hard to get used to.

"Oh! Kat, look! I led the committee that designed this " said Kelsey, pointing to another building on her left. "Also, I painted the entrance by hand"

Kat stopped and stared. Kelsey's design was a central curve that reversed directions, with bands of rougher, ledge-like terraces patterned by the hundreds wrapped around it. Open balconies full of different greeneries jutted throughout, and the walls were studded with confusing little circles.

Kat squinted. "Is that—"

"You know it," smiled Kelsey, "it's an integrated aviary. All the way up". Looking closer, Kat saw the distant specks of large birds landing in the confusing curl—oh, the nests. Kat counted dozens of birds as her gaze made its way back to the ground floor.

A beautiful falcon's head was painted at the entrance, matching the shades and tones of the building's verdant design. Its eyes shone down on Kat.

"You painted this by hand?" asked Kat.

"Yeah, do you like it?"

"I love it" said Kat, "and you painted this by hand?"

Kelsey's voice became testy, "we have already established that. It was a team of three of us"

"Did they let you paint it *because* you led the committee?"

"What the venom?"

This was bad. She had dipped on something that hurt.

"Forgive me for the uncooperative offense!" she said, the words foreign on her tongue but producing the intended effect.

"It's not your fault you don't know anything, Kat" sighed Kelsey, in a tone she would probably apologize for, soon afterwards.

Kelsey opens up

After an hour of sweating and shaking beneath the music, Kat and Kelsey found themselves a seat. Jasmine showed no signs of letting up, dancing and holding hands with a few others.

"Does she always have so much energy?" observed Kat, eyebrows up.

"Sometimes. Unless she's sad. Then she won't last even a minute"

Kat shrugged.

"My mom used to play up there," said Kelsey, looking up and pointing to a spot on the wave, "she was a violinist".

The word “was” hit Kat.

“...how did she?”

“Cancer. Of the lungs”

“I’m so sorry.”

“Cancer survival rates are now at 98.6%. Uterine cancer is at 96.5%. But those are numbers for you. I was 8”

Kat nodded.

“I just wanted to tell you,” said Kelsey, “just so you don’t take anything around here too literally. Despite the statue on every corner claiming otherwise, there’s not always enough of everything. By any means.”

Kat sat silently as Kelsey continued, not wanting to say something to stop her trace.

“I was a cynical kid,” admitted Kels, “We’d be singing these songs, in school, about how grateful we are for everything. And I’d hate it. Sometimes I’d walk out. I had so many counselors, Kat. A new one every few months. And I hated all of them.

Still, a lot of people seem fake to me. Like they are trying too hard, too petty or and miss the whole point, you know?”

Kat nodded slowly.

I wonder if that’s why I got on with Jaz. She’s up, or down, but she’s not really good at pretending, you know?”

“Definitely not,”

"I don't think you should be scared of Council, Kat. You really shouldn't. I know a few members; I look up to them. There's this one woman with long hair, and she seems so....serene? Like she's seen it all, and can call it out, but belongs to something grander".

"that's poetic"

"Don't laugh! Maybe I idolize her like Jaz does Lydia. Maybe I'll be her one day. Honestly, maybe one day soon, it's just a few years till I'm voted onto council. Do you want to know how voting works?"

"Sure," replied Kat.

"Everyone who is interested in working on a project is assembled into a voting bloc. And you have to vote for someone else. You can form an alliance to trade, of course, but that understandably backfires"

So it's like a popularity contest, though Kat.

"I've gotten onto every committee I've ever tried to be a part of," smiled Kels, proudly.

Kelsey wrapped her arm around Kat, "I'm rambling a lot. You're still very quiet," she said to Kat observantly.

"It's just all a lot," said Kat.

"Okay," Kelsey nodded, "I'm here when you need me. I think maybe we were meant to meet".

Chapter 8

introducing L ogos

Right on the dot at 4pm, Jasmine had her arms crossed as Zed gingerly landed a bright green heli in a small clearing outside her home.

“How are we taking a heli to Lago?,” said Jasmine, “Ashe and Logos both have collective agreements to fight air congestion”

Kelsey shrugged, “Lots of people can still take helis out on demand.”

“For community projects, Kels”

“I think of welcoming Kat as a community project. It’s just not official”.

Jasmine sighed, and shook her head, her dark brown locks echoing her disapproval, “so did you sign in as Peter’s, or from one of your analysis committees?”

“Look, deconstructions projects are so random, and no one checks, and more importantly it doesn’t hurt anyone”

“Does Peter know?”

Kelsey’s face took on a pained or board expression, “It’s not worth troubling him about, Jaz, no one else thinks it’s a thing”

“Oh come on, Jaz” Zed yelled, leaning his torso out the window, “Let’s go. We got the skies to ourselves!”

As Jasmine begrudgingly climbed into the heli, Zed sprung upwards then twisted in a big loop, inspiring a yelp from all three of them.

Kat clung to her seat and watched Mililac from afar.

Kat watched as a ray of light shone up on the city's crescent.

The crescent was a collaborative design project, arising from the illusion of connection between many buildings.

"So my great-grandmother's generation voted for the crescent structure," said Kelsey, resuming her usual lecture and composure, "it's an ode to collaboration, but a rejection of uniformity. All the different buildings come together in a composition. It works because everyone agreed to build using the same external material, just a few stories beyond their neighbor, and within the guidelines. You can't break the skyline in the crescent area— it was a big win for Ashe. It's 6 layers of buildings across the whole city. So you have to be shorter from back to front, and then a little taller than the neighbor on your right. That way, when the sun's rays hit, the entire skyline responds in one narrative,"

Kat observed that no one was bothering to hide her ignorance in front of Zed, which implied that someone had said something.

She looked at Zed curiously, and he returned her glance with a wink.

"But there's some flexibility," persisted Kelsey, pointing to the domes and spires, the crests that looked like waves, the tremendous variation that sinks in after a minute of observation "As long as your design is within standard perimeters, there's a lot you can do. It creates an epic effect from a far, but preserves the individuality that makes the skyline interesting over time"

"Would you ever rebuild it all differently?" asked Kat.

"Like if something breaks?"

"No, if you wanted downtown to look differently"

Jasmine scoffed, "like tear it down in the name of style?"

Kat raised her eyebrows at the implication. "Oh, so *that's* wasteful?"

Kelsey snickered. "Leave it to you to find out exactly what gets a rise out, Kat"

"Put it this way— " interrupted Jaz, "you'll meet some people today who think we should literally destroy everything we've built and redo everything, with each generation, or every day if we can pull it off. But everyone who's got their feet on the ground knows that's insane"

"Jace is the worst of them— you'll meet him, Kat" added Zed, "He thinks we're going to have the tech to project an image of what we want the city to look like, tweak it, and get it rebuilt overnight. He thinks we will be there in 20 years. If that's true, I wouldn't mind being dead by then".

"That's a little dramatic," giggled Jasmine. "But I feel you. Our ancestors worked on all these beautiful projects, and tried, as much as they could, to make them longlasting. Rebuilding things that already exist seems... yeah, pretty wasteful to me. But mostly uncomfortable, like who really wants to live in a world that changes every day?".

"Jace wants to live in a video game"

"He already does!"

"Anyway, both Verdant and Ashe fight for conservation. And there's so many new things to be built! It's possible the population will eventually stabilize or even decline, but we haven't quite gotten there yet, and people are happy to have second and third homes".

"And of course every project needs its own office".

"Verdant is very against *that* ," said Jasmine, raising her eyebrows, "Pearl used to rage against it. Every project & team does not need its own branded office"

She looked down at the ground and shrugged, "but you know, they can be fun....and um, I have one", she added, sheepishly.

"But over at Lagos, where we are going...." Kelsey shook her head, "oh man, Kat, get ready, the rules are a little different. Building is a part of the identity; some people think if they aren't building something, they'll drop dead on the spot"

"—some wish they would"

"Zed! Honestly, Kat, the latest trends are less about architecture. Our grandparents contributed to more buildings per capita than we did. We're lucky if we've worked on 2-3 buildings in our lifetimes!

Anyway!" she sighed, taking a deep breath, "I was saying that past the circle of Ashe, in Logos, there are almost no rules. Certainly none about the skyline. So the buildings are self-contained, they rarely work in a unit. The skyline is all over the place"

Kat watched the buildings get so tall that they almost seemed swallowed up by the clouds above them.

Jed plunged the heli onto the street,

"What the hell, Zed, you are definitely not supposed to do that!!" cried Jaz.

"Just a quick drop off for you guys! Get out— I'll park at Kevin's lot around the corner"

Kelsey, Kat and a very annoyed Jasmine jumped out as soon as possible.

"He just wanted Kat to see the gate, Jaz " , explained Kelsey. She put a hand on Kat's shoulder and pointed, "look up".

"So this isn't really, like 'the gate to Logos", said Jasmine, "there's no official "end of Logos" section, it's more like a vibe shift"

"Then about 30 years ago the NeonManta team got the enthusiasm to build *this* design and it kinda marks the spot"

Kat looked up. A gigantic plane of glass appeared across the whole street in front of her, as high up as 500 stories. It appeared to keep going, straight up into the clouds. It can't really be glass, thought Kat, shuddering as she imagined what would happen if an earthquake came.

The glass shimmered and suddenly runes and glyphs appeared all over it.

"That's the molecular structure," explained Kelsey, "but now it's going to shift and imagine the structure as abstract geometry, and now as poetic honesty"

" As what ?"

Suddenly the structure began to crack, and Kat gasped, as new words, embossed in a bright neon gold, etched themselves onto the glass.

There is no limit to the human imagination.

The words exploded into noiseless fireworks, and the glass they were written on seemed to disappear as Kelsey, Jasmine and a slightly anxious Kat stepped forward.

"Like I said, that wasn't really like, *the* gate, but it's pretty neat right?"

Kat could only nod. "The one thing you should know about Logal," said Jasmine, "is that you should probably take a deep breath now, because it's kind of a lot"— she sighed— "and all the time".

The first building that caught Kat's eye was a whirling series of kaleidoscopes, like little circles of spinning color, set in the backdrop of a gigantic tall black rectangle.

Across the street sat a building that was one giant kaleidoscopic pattern, with spinning disks of black spiraling in the exact pattern to mimic the first.

"That's some collaboration," joked Kat, at Jasmine.

"That's as much as you'll get," she quipped back.

As Kat walked forward, statues of bulbous numbers seemed to ooze up and out of the sidewalk. A little note "climbable" appeared in front of them.

Kat stepped around the 1, and 3, but couldn't help but climb up on the friendlier 5.

The numbers seemed to curl around the next block and stretch off into infinity,

"What is this?"

"A sequence of primes."

Kat frowned, "of numbers that can't be divided by another number?"

"Yes! Good job" said Kesley, with a patronly tone.

"Why would people sculpt that on the sidewalk?"

"Kat *do not ask me that* "

They heard Zed's laugh around the corner, as he ran to catch up with them. "Ask someone who lives here, they're always happy to explain their ideas. Don't ask Jasmine tho. She'll spiral. "

At the next corner, they walked past a shifting sculpture that changed and morphed form, becoming a polygon, a cone, a circle, sometimes several of these structures on top of one another,

Near it was a screen that displayed areas, and the formulas being used to calculate them.

Little robotic animals, no bigger than one foot tall, buzzed around, cleaning the streets and causing Kat to trip at one point.

"Peter is going to be here soon," said Kelsey, as they walked down a sidewalk that registered each of their steps and changed color according to 'the force they generated'.

"We left Nico with our babysitter today. Once we start up in Logal, we are usually out all night."

"Don't you get tired?"

"Trust me, if you go to one of these parties, you'll be yapping till 5am. I used to do it all the time, bless my younger, less wise self".

They turned a corner,

"I painted this one, by the way", said Kelsey.

A brilliant array of colors seemed to flow from one point, and fall towards another point on the left. The painting had a metallic glow. Kat felt like if she stared at it long enough, it would start to move on its own accord.

"It's beautiful".

"Thanks. It's a visualization of electromagnetism. I made it at 16. It felt groundbreaking at the time. Now I realize how much everyone humored me"

They walked on to see a beautiful building shaped like a pair of hands being held.

"That would not have been possible before print building technology," said Jasmine.

"All of this really got built on Wednesdays?"

"Only in the last two generations. Maybe three generations ago, they used to do Monday through Thursday? Five or six generations ago, there would have been a lot more chaotic construction. But those were completely different times"

"Can you imagine being here, when the library went up? The core temple?", asked Jamine, leading them around the corner.

Kat imagined drilling, bags of cement and rows of people wearing hard hats, all holding hands.

"Um, maybe a little. I'm not sure if I have the right id— what the hell is that?"

Kat pointing to a terrifying sculpture of a female face, 10 ft high, shaking side to side as her hair lit on fire, breathing fire.

"Rage" said Jasmine.

"How did this pass?" she said, shocked that resources would be allocated to build...this.

"About 20 years ago. There was an assault on a woman who worked in Logal design . She was murdered. 12th homicide we've ever had, in 200 years. This sculpture was created by the design team she worked with," said Jasmine, softly.

"What happened to the murderer?"

"He was offered a choice; a lifetime of penitentiary or death. He chose death".

Kat shuddered.

"Kat, he was a madman. No one thought he was capable of reason."

"What about his family?"

"Sadly, his family as well. His mother cried nonstop for two years, talked about taking her life. She was a teacher too"

"His father?"

"I don't know. Kept a low profile".

Kat shuddered, the way she had shuddered when she learned about the cartels back at home, or how the police shot two children on their block.

"I try not to think about it too much," admitted Jasmine. "Let's keep walking".

They walked up to a sleek, futuristic ten-story house with rounded corners, wrapped in floor-to-ceiling glass. Blue LED lighting traces the edges of the design, and at the very top, it featured several blue spires & towers, one that led out into a chimney.

"We're walking empty handed?" asked Kelsey.

"Surely not," said Jasmine, and they quickly turned the corner, to a flashing yellow & red machine.

" Welcoming abundance," said Kelsey, to the machine, which then popped out 20 sandwiches.

"May we always have enough," replied Jasmine, habitually.

"Fast food isn't the best," she added, handing Kat one of the sandwiches, "but this crew, they will eat anything."

As Kat took her first bite, a few kids ran by, and one of them grabbed sandwiches off of Jasmine's plate.

"May we always have enough!" one yelled, as they ran away.

"Brats!" exclaimed Jasmine. "God, were we that bad when we were young?"

"No way," Kelsey shook her head, walking back to the glass house, "Nico's never going to be like that".

"Wait for me!" yelled a voice, just before they rang the door. They turned to see Peter running towards them. He kissed Kelsey, caught his breath and then added, voice full of amusement "That was a cute little robbery. Shall we go in?"

kelsey's fight with Brendon

"Welcome back home!" yelled a warm, and now familiar voice.

Kevin greeted everyone with enthusiasm as soon as they stepped in the door.

Kat's first glance inside registered one word: 'sprawl'.

People were laid out in various positions across all the furniture. One rebel sat studiously at a table. The rest were draped in all sorts of awkward positions; laying on the couch, on the floor, hanging from the ceiling, poured over pillows that look like dice, one even sitting in what appeared to be a hot tub in the

corner of the room. Everyone was glued to a table or device of various sizes or had a projection map before them.

Kevin caught her stare and winked. "It's very heads down right now— people will get more social towards the evening," he reassured her.

"Okay", shrugged Kat.

As Kevin's attention turned to welcoming the others, Kat took a look at the walls around her.

Over $\frac{3}{4}$ of the walls were covered in a matrix of screens; the last quarter hosting some perfectory-looking plants, and a window.

Kat squinted, a little overwhelmed by the stimuli. Many of the screens showed graphs, lists, arrays of constantly changing numbers. Maps with color coordination Kat didn't understand, and talking heads that were talking over each other. Kat gathered that some of it must be financial data, some political commentary..

There was a click and half the screens displayed a flowing stream of water instead.

"Hey," said a man with light brown hair, wearing a thick pair of goggles, "Kelsey just said you're from Verdant min. I'll try to chill out the vibe a little for you".

"It's okay," said Kat, instinctively, feeling a little embarrassed she was so obviously overwhelmed, and also the 10 screens that were still up— well, it felt was somewhere between 9 and 10 too many.

"I'm keeping a close eye on Kjilen data, and the other one is the regression rate on cloptics"

"What's on the third screen?" asked Kat, desperately trying to fit in.

“Oh, that’s just a video game I’m playing”

“Jace, you can’t sit here and watch Cloptic patterns all day. You’ll go nuts”.

“Good to see you, Kels”

“But while you’re at it, can you just summarize the last week’s trends?”

"We can head upstairs," said Kevin, ushering them firmly up the stairs, "it's a better place to talk".

"Jaz! Kelsey!" a voice called out from the top of the stairs.

"Becca!" Jasmine called back.

"Parker's here with me, come on up".

At the top of the stairs was a large circular room with a giant blue velvet cushion in the center. A boy sat with his feet up on the couch, curled around a tablet. He jumped up and headed downstairs with a small heads down "hey".

Jasmine sat the sandwiches down on the center table. "Thanks for bringing that over, Jaz. That would be nice with some lemonade, a tonic and a salad, don't you think?". Kevin pressed some buttons on a cabinet in the corner.

Kat sat gingerly on a blue velvet cushion and watched the windows. The sun sparkled brightly on the city all around them

Jace took off his goggles, and handed them to Kelsey.

“See how it’s coming along”.

Kelsey smiled and tapped the sides a little, then stood up as if mesmerized by a building through the window. She was whispering to herself, which made her

look a little nuts.

“You’ve really nailed down the textural changes!” she exclaimed after a while.

Jace laughed, “I spent a month on getting that down”.

“I still can’t get it to produce a realistic tree”.

“Well a tree is much harder, but wait just a few years, the tech will get here.”

Kelsey took the goggles off, “Jaz, want a look?”

Jaz shook her head and touched her stomach, “I think I don’t feel good with those,”

“What are they?” asked Kat, before she could help herself.

“Augmentation glasses,” replied Peter, “it’s considered a solution to design tension in the city, particularly between conservationist groups and progressives.”

“They allow you to see the city as you want it to be,” said Jace. “You can change the design of any building, imagine anything and see it come to life.”

“Here”, he said, pulling out an extra pair from his backpack, “Jaz, these have motion sickness protection, give it one shot.”

Jaz raised her eyebrows and put the glasses on, hesitantly.

Jace observed her patiently, “I feel like designers will get the biggest kick out of these”.

Jaz stepped up, a little away from everyone, and looked around slowly. She whispered a few things. Then she took the glasses off and nodded.

“What do you think?” prompted Jace.

“I uh, I’m sure many people will really enjoy these”

Kevin and Peter burst out laughing. Jasmine blushed.

“Okay, okay, I guess I just don’t find it engaging. It’s like, what’s the point, if no one else can see it?”

“But you can see it,” responded Jace.

“I guess,” shrugged Jaz. “Here, Kat, give it a go”

“You can just imagine color,” said Kelsey, “but that’s the only thought process that’s dialed in so far, otherwise, just whisper what you want to see. Like ‘the room is red’ try that”.

Red. Before she even had a chance to whisper that, Kat was startled by all the furniture swishing from blue to red immediately. It was funny the things that glasses picked up on. The couch was red, the table mahogany, but the sky was still blue.

Make everything spiky , whispered Kat.

She laughed. This was wild!

“How does it work?” she asked.

There’s six models working in unison! It’s basically real time video processing, and the image is being translated into real world physics. Every component is assigned a separate id, and those ids are clustered into a variety of concepts. Now the memory on this is 18tb, so that means usually it only takes one glance to make a space “permanent” and that gets added to collective memory—“

"Jasmine!" said a voice, booming from the stairway. A thin, tall boy with a round nose and glasses poked his head up. "How's your little dress shop going in Ashe going?"

"Um. Well, thanks," said Jaz, her brows furrowing.

"He means well," Kat heard Zed whisper to her.

"They all do", she heard Jaz sigh back.

The man strode up the final step of the stairs and stepped into their circle. He stuck his hand out to Kat first,

"Pleasure to meet you....?"

"Kat," she filled in,

"I'm Brendon. I'm one of the engineers here. Do you have more than everything you need?"

"Thank you," said Kat, as Brendon said hello to everyone. The greetings weren't as warm as usual, Kat noticed, and when Brendon held out his hand to Kelsey, she just took a sip of lemonade.

"I just ran an update in the hospital system," he offered, turning to Kevin, who seemed to like him well enough "automated prosthetic personalization, through a series of simple movement scans. Add to that some genetic data, and you can accurately predict how the prosthetic will experience stress over time".

"That's wonderful," marveled Kat, earning a glare from Kelsey.

"What's the energetic usage of that process?" asked Kevin.

"Not that bad. I calculated conservatively and the board approved. It's actually an energy save because it prevents multiple fittings,"

"Prosthetics are a small niche" noted Becca, "I'm guessing you're planning on doing the same with hip replacements?"

"If I can get the collaboration going with Jane's team, but they have some concerns".

"Such as automated personalization takes out the part of the process where an actual person addresses your needs?" said Kelsey, vehemently.

"These systems are meant to work in tandem", Brendon snapped back coldly.

"But in practice they won't!" said Kelsey, anger building in her voice, "In practice, our doctors are busy, and if there's nothing physical someone needs, they will be deprioritized".

"If someone has that moral failing, that's not on me"

"Everyone has that moral failing!"

Brendon frowned, turning to Kevin. "This is an aggressive environment in a progressive household ."

Kevin busied himself with filling Kat's drink and exchanging a glance with Peter. Peter, opened his palms and placed them outwards;

"Perhaps it would be best to take a mome—"

"You need to take responsibility," snapped Kelsey, interrupting Peter and turning to Brendon with full force, "for the way your technology could impact human care. And wait for the hospitals to collaborate with you before pushing it through with council".

"Hospitals are notoriously risk-adverse" countered Brendon "and unwelcoming of new technology, that's why that process exists"

"That's pure blindness to impact".

"You're completely missing how this could improve people's lives"

"You mean *your life* , because this is your latest scheme to capitalize on impact"

Even Kat wasn't sure that was called for.

Brendon paused. Then,

"Not all of us can be impact oriented, Kelsey"

Kelsey stood up. "Go fuck yourself".

"Kels," pleaded Becca, putting an hand on her elbow.

But Kelsey wouldn't have it. She grabbed her bag, threw it over her shoulder and stood up. "That's it," she said, "We're leaving."

With that, she stomped down the stairs, leaving an awkward silence.

Jasmine sighed, rose and smoothed out her skirt.

"I'm sure an abundance of other opportunities will present themselves for us all to connect". Then she bowed, and followed Kelsey.

Peter and Zed exchanged a look, then both looked at Kevin at once. Kevin bit his lip. Zed nodded, and indicated that Kat should come with them.

"Most of us will be back," said Peter, "we're just going to take a moment to chat with Kelsey."

They found Kelsey brooding at the bottom of the stairs outside the house.

"No humility!" she shouted as soon as they came in ear shot, "No fucking humility in the entire fucking neighborhood, if you can call it a neighborhood. Which I won't. There's no collaboration."

"There's certainly collaboration," said Jasmine, steadily.

"Collusion is not collaboration!"

Kelsey turned to Kat, indignant, "everything you see here, in Lagos, is a trade, everyone wants to partner with the most useful person, to get their needs met."

And what's so wrong with that? thought Kat.

Kelsey replied like she read her mind: "All of us, one day, aren't going to be very useful. Every single person you meet will have to beg someone else one day, to stay alive a little longer. People who forget that are fucking idiots".

Jaz sat down and wrapped her arms around Kelsey.

Zed gazed protectively at his two friends and said, "I have the heli on the roof two blocks down. We could leave".

"Let's get the fuck out. Now. Peter, will you stay with Kat? I don't want to ruin her night and I can't deal with this"

She kissed him on the cheek, and turned to leave, but Peter slowed her down by picking up her hand and kissing it.

"Take good care. We will be out late"

"Thank you, love," she replied.

"Stay useful, Kat," Kelsey said sardonically.

Sorry , mouthed Jasmine behind Zed's back, as the three of them walked away.

peter takes her to a party

Kat looked bewildered, and turned that gaze onto Peter.

He raised an eyebrow and shook his brown curls.

"So that was Kelsey's temper." he smiled, more amused than anything else
"subtle, isn't it?"

Registering that Kat's shock was a bit less humoured, he added,

"The things she said about everyone in Lagos....it's an exaggeration. You shouldn't make assumptions on anyone's character based on their leanings. That was more -- or really, all about Brendon. They um, they don't get along anymore. And it's a little tense."

Clearly.

"What happened?" asked Kat,

"Kelsey used to live in Lagos, remember? It's where we met. And Brendon did, too. In fact, he was one of her first friends here. At the age of 18? Something very young.

They were generally very close, and they had a habit of allying on positions. And causing trouble. Both of them were a little obnoxious back in the day. One time they rewired all the lighting across three neighborhoods so it would pulse in time with a rave they threw. Well, in her mid twenties, Kelsey started to lean

more Ashe. So they began to disagree, more and more. She started being quite critical of Lagos leanings, and they started to fight, pretty hard."

Peter sighed, and sat on the blue terrazzo of the stairs.

"Well, there's a practice of healing we do for friendships"

"The 177 days?" asked Kat.

"No, Jaz told you about that? No, it's not that long. For friendships, I mean, not romantic relationships. Not because they are less important. Just because they're generally easier to fix. It's recommended that you work with a moderator for three sessions, and then go for a long hike together, two dinners, and one work assignment within the next year."

"That's not *that* much, but it's not nothing."

"Exactly. Kelsey wanted to do it with Brendon. Brendon didn't want to do it."

Kat nodded.

"He said that their main value together was as an alliance, and if there was no hope of an alliance in the future, he didn't want to waste either of their time."

"That's cold" said Kat.

"Exactly. And you know Kelsey. She never forgave Brendon. Although, in a way, Brendon wasn't wrong, she does have better companions now, who understand her more," he smiled.

"You mean you," laughed Kat.

"I do mean that. I gotta admit, at least while no one can hear me, it hurt that she went to Jasmine first, with you. But what can you do," he shrugged, "they

go way back. And besides," he said, brightening, "she entrusted me with you tonight! And we are going to have a wonderful time"

A big grin lit up his face and he said, "ready to come back into this scene? Everyone is going to pretend that nothing ever happened".

"That sounds weird".

"You get used to it. It's Logal."

They began to walk down the stairs from which they came. More people had arrived upstairs.

"We don't have to join the crowd," said Peter, accurately reading Kat's face, "We can sit on the side for a bit. We'll have a drink. Keep in mind we are in an open space".

Peter tapped out some instructions on the table, and shortly two drinks materialized.

Kat felt a lot of pressure to know how to hold a normal conversation.

"So what is deconstruction?" whispered Kat.

"What did Kelsey tell you?"

"Just that you work in it".

"Deconstruction & sustainability. Our role is to pull apart anything that's no longer of use, and to take it, as much as possible, into its separate raw materials so that it can be used again. This is everything from the packaging that goes on foods, to electronics, old bicycles to — if we have to take down and remodel a building."

"Wow, so you're on the side."

"The other side of what?"

"Well. Almost every one here is building. All the time. Creating new ideas for the future. But you're thinking differently".

"Exactly. Not everyone thinks my role is so hot." He tipped his glass towards Kat, "But Kelsey does. She gets it".

Kat nodded, "Why'd you choose it?"

She had learned by now, that almost everyone here loved being asked about their choices, and it was a pretty easy way to keep the conversation focused on them.

"We have so much new growth here, everyday. There's a billion ideas being thrown around, and we are so lucky that construction only happens on Wednesdays, let me tell you, because that slowness is a useful deterrent to impulse.

But if we didn't have deconstruction & sustainability initiatives, this place would be a wasteland. It would be covered in junk that people created on an impulse. Logal would be the worst of it at. They'd hide it somewhere until it all spilled over. They have the highest project abandonment rate.

Even as it is, we have landfills. But my job is to make sure they are as small as possible, so we can recover our resources from impulse, place it back into materials printing technology."

Kat looked up at Peter with admiration.

"But I still get my creative fix, Kat," he smiled, "I'll show you some of the things I've painted tonight".

"You paint?"

"That's how Kelsey and I met," he laughed, "painting in Logal".

Some of the stress Kat felt from witnessing the fight (and generally being in a new locale) was starting to diminish. She began to flush with excitement— they had the whole night here!

"Like your drink?"

"What's in it?"

"M43 and a little D12. It's a specialty around here. Logal specialty. It should give you some energy, as we're going to be out for a while. Are you ready to rejoin the group?"

"What's D12?"

"Just a compound that eases out the effects of M43"

Some use that answer was.

"Let's do it," she said, in response to Peter.

Peter offered an arm and Kat took it, and they walked back up to the curved velvet couch surrounded by a now full force sunset.

"Welcome back," said Brendon dryly.

"Welcoming abundance, friend" said Peter, "so get me caught up to date, I haven't been around for a few years.

"Kevin, Becca, Jace, Lane and Logan are all living here still," he said pointing, "Parker, Ryan and Hinge all left for the experiment across the street. Hun, Ben and Nebula all moved in with partners from Ashe, but I guess you already know that, don't you?"

Peter grinned, "it gets the best of them"

Parker leaned over to introduce himself, "I'm Parker, I live with Zed. I haven't seen you around before"

"I've only been to Lagos a few times, on a school trip. I'm from Verdant"

"Don't go dancing much either do you?"

Kat blushed.

"Have some modesty, Parker," said Peter, coming to her rescue (as someone was prepared to, every two sentences). "I don't think you've met everyone in the state".

"If anyone has," chimed in Becca, "Parker has. I'm Becca. Kevin's girlfriend."

"Pleasure to meet you."

Be careful of Becca , Jasmine had warned her, she picks up on things that others don't. I wouldn't chat too long with her.

"And I'm Lane", said the girl next to her, "Becca's wisdom".

"Definitely not true."

"Well, where else do you keep it?"

Kat watched Lane giggle and kept staring at her far longer than normal. Lane wore tight high boots with bright neon and a dress that looked like a rubix cube. She had a device strapped around her wrist that had 4 screens on them, but she didn't seem distracted by it. She was flanked by two lanky men in glasses, that she introduced as her boyfriends, Paul and Logan.

They grinned at Kat in a way that made her blush.

Her gaze fell back to Lane, the way her long black hair went almost to her thighs.

Peter came to her rescue again.

"Greg, Lane! Logan! It's a gift to see you."

Peter is so attuned , thought Kat. *He's nice to have around.*

"Carter," grinned the boy to her right, interrupting her thoughts as he stuck out his hand for a shake, "May we have an abundance of experiences together. This is my best friend, Dylan".

Dylan stuck out his hand next, and then Kat went in a circle, from Jace, Parker, Mark and and Logan. Kat wondered how the hell she was going to keep everyone straight. It seemed like everyone spoke for a few minutes, and then traded partners. *How did you know the right moment to start and end a conversation* , wondered Kat,

And how does any actually interesting conversation come of this?

"Where are you coming from?" asked Logan,

"Verdant Mountains," replied Kat, with a rehearsed nature she wasn't worried about; that's how everyone must reply to these basic questions, "My mother was a little protective, so I haven't been to Logal too many times before".

She tried to shake off the attention as it came, but it was harder than ever. Kevin was quite keen on her making a proper introduction of everyone, and getting her another drink whenever she seemed nervous. She tried to flip it,

"So what's your role here?"

"I'm a principal coordinator"

"Sound fancy"

"It's not. There's designers, and there are coordinators, and problem solvers, and almost everyone falls into one of these two roles, depending on preference. I have a knack of getting people organized."

"Definitely seems like it. What projects are you working on now?"

"Enough with the small talk, Kat!," piped in Parker, "We want to know more about you. Logan can talk about his projects all day!"

Kelsey had given her some training, prior to their Logal arrival. There were some questions that people were used to, and were always happy to answer.

"What projects are you working on now?"

"What's your role on the project?"

"What factors are you considering?" This one is the best one, people will completely forget everything and start complaining to you"

"Yeah, Kat," said Carter, "What's your take on the house so far?"

"Well, I just got here"

"No better time to answer. If you could change one thing around here, what would it be?"

Kat froze. She looked around, desperate to notice something. With the space's perfect lighting, bronze details and comfortable blue couches, there didn't seem to be much room for improvement.

"I'd make your names appear above your heads, but only visible to people who don't know you. Once you memorized someone's name, the text would disappear."

People around her roared in laughter, and Brendon said, "you know, that's a great idea. I haven't seen that since the third grade—"

"Oh, I didn't—"

"Didn't you work on Logal project in high school?" asked someone's voice, but Kat couldn't even make out who.

Peter came to her rescue again, "Carter's from Verdant, by the way. And not just any Verdant, he grew up on a boat".

"You did?" asked Kat, eternally grateful for Peter.

"That's right," said Peter, "You know that small collection of boats that live about a mile offshore, some call it the bare bones island. That's where his family still lives"

"Woah. What was it like growing up there?" asked Kat, with genuine wonder.

"It was beautiful," said Carter, "I still take almost all my design inspiration from the ocean, I've been ruined in that way. I think it makes me a bit more easy going; I don't need much, I'm not used to much. But it was also hard...once I turned 15, it felt like everyone had ten years of experience that I didn't."

Kat nodded, understanding completely.

"I was pretty angry," continued Carter, "at my family, originally. We didn't talk for a few years, and they weren't even surprised. But over time, I started to see what they were trying to protect me"

"It's so that he doesn't become someone like me," replied Parker with a big grin, "No, I'm serious. I grew up in Logal. Everyone in my family fits the stereotype; everyone's obsessed with legacy; my family's responsible for at least an eighth of the madness you see around you. They say Logal kids always struggle with addiction and anxiety, constantly feeling like we're falling behind and....it's true. You know, reporting from the front lines."

He shrugged, "That's why I like hanging out with Carter. He doesn't make me feel like I'm behind." Parker wrapped his arm around Carter affectionately.

Kat smiled.

"So what's the deal with the boat island? Can I visit?"

Her heart started pounding, reminding her she might be saying too much. But instead, Carter just said,

"Have you done much sailing? There's a whole archipelago of man made islands with gorgeous design; many people don't even bother to explore them at all, but I grew up sailing them all. Verdant went hard to prevent cruise ships from being built, so access remains limited. But the one my family chose to 'dock' on was really nothing more than a collection of ships that'd chain themselves together and go camping, basically. There was a lot of partying, but my family always tried to keep me away from that"

Kat looked at Peter,

"I'm sure Kelsey could arrange to take you sailing," he leaned in and whispered in her ear, "if you really wanted to".

Brandon came over and took a seat next to Parker, and started tapping an order for a drink.

"Where did you grow up?" asked Kat, turning to him

"Just five streets away. I come from a long family of problem solvers, and they had a lot of pride around that."

Designers. Coordinators. Problem Solvers. You could be all three, that was encouraged, but was very difficult in practice. One great divide across leanings was whether a person should develop holistically, taking on all three roles, or if they should specialize.

It seemed to vary more by personality than anything else.

"Kelsey's pretty good at rounding all three," admitted Brendon, when the conversation came up.

peter party lane dress

Two hours later, Lane announced "I think we should go out."

She lifted her boots up off the table, and turned to Kevin for support

Kat drew a circle on the table next to her, until the time lightly glowed upon the surface; 11:53, close to midnight.

"Oh, come, it's still early," replied Logan, much to Kat's surprise, "We should wait a bit for the music to get good"

"Yeah, but if everyone gets ready now," said Kevin, who was clearly born as a master of ceremonies, "then we won't be heading out at like 2am".

The lone wall of screaming screens shifted channels, and a chorus of reactions assaulted Kat's ear.

“Yup, there you go, Crystal Text is playing at 2, we have to make it out by that”

“—at the same time as my friend’s group, damn”

“Kevin, I can see how crowded it’s going to be now, but can you fast forward the predictor in forty minutes?”

“Why are you asking me?”

“Well, I’m not on the remote anymore, you should just keep on the remote, I come over so often”

“— congestion is bad on Mainframe, but if we took Turing getting to The Cage could be fast”.

Kevin pressed a button on his wrist, and his voice became amplified,

"Hands up if you want to go out tonight with the group!"

Hands shot up all around them.

"Are we going?" Kat whispered to Peter, hopefully.

Peter smiled, "I haven't gone out in Lagos since before Kelsey and I had Nico!"

"Kat and I are in," he shouted back to Kevin.

"Let her speak for herself next time!" Kevin quipped back.

"Kat, want to borrow something fun from me?" asked Lane.

Lane's clothes? That was an interesting proposition.

"Thank you for demonstrating such abundance," said Kat. In her mind, Kelsey clapped.

"My room", Lane said, "let's go". Kat picked up that Becca looked like she wanted to join, but luckily Lane didn't follow through with an invitation.

Lane grabbed her hand and pulled her down two levels of blue terrazzo stairs, until she walked to a door and put her hand on it.

"Why aren't you opening?" Lane asked of her door.

A mild male voice boomed on, "My apologies, Lane. You're with an unidentified guest."

Kat froze.

"That shouldn't matter," replied Lane, continuing to address her door, "you should always open for me"

"How am I supposed to protect your security, then?"

"If someone is trying to come in without me, without my prior authorization, *then* don't let them in, duh. Come on, Kat".

Lane's room was a pronouncement of neon. All the furniture and all the walls were made out of either a transparent pink tinted glass, or an orange one, with curious accents.

"It's my favorite aesthetic," she offered Kat, pointing to the acrylic all around her. The floor was pink; two of the walls orange, and the last two walls a swirling blend of both colors. The ceiling was mirrored.

All of Lane's furniture also seemed made of plastic cubes, except for a gigantic stuffed giraffe that sprawled on her bed. She went over and pet it with great affection,

"Isn't the long neck so cute?" she fawned.

Welcome back, Lane, announced the giraffe in the voice that had startled Kat earlier, and was at it again. The stuffed giraffe somehow mobilized and craned its neck at Kat.

"This is Kat," Lane announced to her mechanical pet, "Kat, this is my pet, Pane. He's top of the line"

"Pleasure to meet you, Kat. Lane, Kat is unidentified in any of our social networks"

Kat's eyes widened. "Sorry," winced Lane.

"Pane, that's rude," she said, addressing him, "In the future, you should give notes like this in private, or send me a ping on my watch. Also, Kat's from Verdant so they don't register very often".

"My apologies, Kat", replied Pane. His voice was oddly masculine for a stuffed giraffe.

"It's um, okay, Pane," said Kat awkwardly.

Lane smiled. "Unfamiliar?"

Kat nodded.

"I built him myself"

"While you were out," said the dog-giraffe as it faithfully followed her, *"I responded to 12 messages, and researched a solution to your previous inquiry. Do you want a summary now, or—"*

"Save it for Monday, Pane" said Lane, "Is it cold out tonight, Pane?".

"It's 68 degrees out, Lane, with temperatures dropping to 54 as the night progresses. I recommend a light jacket"

"Thank you". Lane walked over to her closet and Pane followed her around like mechanical dog.

Lane brushed one of the walls and it slid open, into a closet with white walls and easily 100 colorful pieces.

You don't need it, Anna's voice reverberated in her head. Funny how in Verdant people talked about how sentient everything was, but here things *actually* were...

"What are you thinking?" asked Lane, "you've got that faraway look".

Kat stumbled. "Oh. I was thinking of Anna, this girl from Verdant, who's always saying—"

"You don't *need* it? I'm so familiar", Lane rolled her eyes, "She's a friend of Jasmine's, we're close. She really rocks her style tho".

Kat raised her eyebrows. "What?" said Lane, "oh my god, did you think they were the enemy? Lots of people in Lagos have good friends in Verdant. Would never live there, though"

She picked up a shiny metal dress that looked like different colored rectangles put together with chain mail. "Thoughts?"

"I'll give it a go," said Kat skeptically, reaching for the dress, "may I try it on?"

Lane shook her head. "We need something more systematic," she said, turning to stand in front of her mirror. She snapped her finger and her reflection showed her in a different outfit, "Have you used one of these? Come here"

“Unregistered user” proclaimed the mirror, as soon as she had taken a step.

Kat panicked. Lane still didn’t.

“This is Kat, you can just remember her this way” she interrupted.

“Can’t map to Mililac residen—”

“Don’t worry about that, we’re in a rush” Lane replied, dismissively, “Sorry, Kat, sometimes it’s buggy. This is my project, so I get to fix it, but I don’t want to think about it right now. Just snap your fingers to try things on. That should still work”.

Kat snapped.

Her reflection showed her wearing the metal dress. Her mouth dropped, “This is fun,” she squealed.

“I’m glad you like it. 5 years, Kat!!”

Kat tried on half of Lane’s closet while Lane chattered about every single failure she’d run up against with this mirror. She was ashamed it took her so long, because soon enough they would be able to morph outfits on demand anyways. Finally, she said,

"Funny that Kelsey left you with Peter. She loves him so much. You know that Zed, her and Jasmine were once a trio, right?"

"Huh?"

"Yeah, they all dated," Lane shook her head, "When they were young. Kelsey broke it off after a year and a half. It was so long ago, maybe eight years or something. They're all still close, though. Funny they didn't tell you".

Kat nodded, taking in Lane's info with a bit of a weird feeling. She thought she'd been getting close with both Kelsey, and Jasmine. Maybe not.

"Don't be sad," said Lane, "it has nothing to do with you, whether they told you or not. You look like a goddess in the metal dress, that's my favorite on you so far— but snap your fingers and say "rubix fuzz"

"Rubiz fuzz" replied Kat, watching her reflection spin in a fuzzy version of the dress Lane wore earlier.

"It looks a little bit more comfortable," said Kat.

"You'll love it. Can I pour you a drink? I'm going to make us something for going out"

Kat nodded, although she was already feeling a little fuzzy from whatever she'd had earlier.

"What's in it?" she asked, attempting a bit more responsibility.

"It's a blend called 'Vibrance', it's going to be a little euphoric, and maybe make you want to dance a little. Probably a bit stronger than what you're used to— I'll make it light"

"Okay," said Kat.

"Why are you so nervous?" asked Lane, point blank.

"It's just my first time in Logos"

"That doesn't really explain why you're so nervous".

"I I don't know," stammered Kat, "it's all just new"

Lane's bracelet buzzed, "One sec, Kat"

"Lane," barked Pane, "monitoring your vitals, I recommend you eat an additional 500 calories with 26 grams of protein before you leave"

"On it, Pane".

"Here," said Lane, unwrapping a candy bar and handing one to Kat too, "this has exactly that". She took a bite of her own and said,

"Don't be intimidated. And don't be scared to get to know people here. Just be yourself" She picked up a fuzzy orange coat and handed it to Kat, "and give this a go to stay warm".

going out in Lagos

Kat felt weirdly energetic for this time of night, and maybe 2% more carefree than normal.

Whatever calming powers of whatever she had drank was being counterbalanced by the pressure of not saying anything stupid. Nothing that would give her away. Nothing that would get Kelsey in trouble, also.

Kat and Lane joined a large group of revelers right outside the house.

The large mob was made mostly of names Kat had already forgotten.

"Twelve is too many," Lane began, and shook her head, "Too much negotiation. Let's split in two, or I'll break off with Greg and Logan at some point"

Kevin rolled his eyes, "oh, come on, you know we're a tight crew".

“Okay,” he addressed the group, voice booming, “we have a newcomer and we want to show her around. What’s good tonight?”

“Ellen Ryre is playing!”

“So’s Crystal Text”

“If she’s new, we have to go with the classics— The Cage”

“this is what I’m talking about,” said Lane, shaking her head, “You guys get one hour of my time, total, then I’m out, making my own choices.

Carter spoke up, “okay, we all wanna see a bunch of niche bands. Let’s take Kat to The Cage first, and then we’ll split up and meet back at the end of the night.”

Parker caught up to Kat, “so are you more of an Ellen Ryre, or a Crystal Text?”

Kat opened her mouth to speak and Carter said “oh god don’t be a Crystal Text head”.

“I like Ellen’s aesthetic,” said Kat, taking a chance, “I like her rhythm”. Of course, she had no idea who Ellen was, but she was feeling bold. Something seemed to be coursing through her that elevated her confidence.

Carter clapped her on the shoulder and said, “Now that’s good taste”.

As they stepped out of the house and into the street, Kat found things surprisingly frenetic. Hundreds of people dressed with great variance were outside after midnight. Lane grabbed Greg and Paul, and indicated Paul to take Kat’s hand.

“Thank you,” she said, as Parker grabbed her other one hand.

“There will be a million people in The Cage,” Greg grumbled.

Jace came around and had everyone touch a box, which then spat out a bunch of tokens. He gave one to everyone and said, “in case we get lost.”

“It will guide you back to your friends,” said Peter, who seemed to be in good spirits. He tucked his token into his pocket.

Up ahead, was a shimmering curtain of light that seemed to cover and protect the whole street.

“Passing into the underworld” warned Kevin, “Do we have everyone?”

“All 10 of us, let’s go!” said Becca.

The whole crew passed through the veil. Kat squinted her eyes, just in case it could hurt her. But that was the wrong instinct.

Deafening music exploded around her. Her hands jumped to cover her ears.

“Sorry!” she squealed to Greg.

“It’s okay. I brought extra earplugs, take them”.

“Thank you,” said Kat, not bothering to argue and stuffing them in her ears, a little embarrassed.

“Sorry,” yelled Peter, “I should have been the one to think of that”.

“Why is it so loud?” asked Kat, but no one heard her.

Kevin's hat appeared to spark up, and a thin stream of yellow starts floated upwards from it.

"Follow me", he yelled. His voice carried. They made it past the crowds of people in various states of dress and undress, in various forms of robotic augmentation, and every color and texture imaginable.

They stood at the cross streets of three huge clubs, which appeared to be in open competition with one another. The thunderous music cracked—

Oh , thought Kat, as she got a clearer glimpse of what was ahead.

Well, that's why it was so loud.

A gigantic metal dome loomed up ahead, filled with pink and blue smoke that hazed over a crown of hundreds. On the left, and right sat two long metal poles that reached up to twice the height of the dome.

Every few minutes, a lightning storm would erupt from one of the poles and pass over the metal dome. Kat had only seen a lightning bolt a few times in her life, and never up close, nor manufactured.

Peter and Parker each took hold of one of her hands, and led her, along with the whole group, up to the entrance of the metal cage.

Unfortunately Kat had already been struck by a different kind of lightning bolt. The realization that she did not want to get fried in a metal cage— even if everyone did seem friendly about it.

She dropped their hands and shook her head, stepping backwards. Peals of laughter erupted around her.

Oh no

She put her hands to her forehead, realizing this was no place for a sane conversation about whether this was safe or not.

"It's okay", whispered a voice a few centimeters from her neck. Kat whirled to see Jace right behind her. "It's really okay. Come on"

Above the door to the metal dome was a little neon sign, simply lit in the word "Abierto".

Well, what exactly were her choices here? Drop everything and run home to Jasmynes?

Biting down on her lip, Kat followed Jace into the metal dome. A bouncer with a blue buzz cut stood ready to bar the door when the dome was actively being electrocuted. Which happened every few minutes. He nodded to Kat as she passed by.

They had barely gotten their whole group in when the dome lit ablaze again. Whoever was playing the music was really playing alongside the thunder. The entire crowd went wild, yelling, jumping, dancing— Kat's heart was racing at a million miles a minute.

"Wanna see something really nuts" asked Jace, his voice again just centimeters from her ear. He almost brushed it,

"Sure," she replied, although there was no way he could hear her.

Jace started climbing the bars of the metal dome. Kat shrieked.

"Jesus christ, Jace", she heard Lane shout.

Jace threw out a joyous laugh, turned and waved at the crowd, many of whom were waving back at him. He climbed up another foot.

"He's insane," Becca yelled, "don't give him attention".

Jace was really riling up the crowd now; he raised his shirt up and tucked it in to show off his stomach. He was maybe 15 feet up. His hands were gripped all

the way around the metal poles. The lightning hit.

Shocked, Jace let go and dropped. The crowd dove to catch him, and dozens of hands lifted him up, and passed him around. He opened his eyes and threw his right fist in the air in the sign of victory.

Kat thought she would pass out. The crowd set him down and Jace winked at her.

She didn't know what it was. Before she could think twice, she was grabbing the metal poles and climbing up. She screamed, definitely sounding more terrified than joyful— but it had the intended effect. A crowd of people formed near her.

"Jesus CHRIST Kat," she heard Lane say below her.

"Kat we're here if you fall!" yelled one of the guys whose name she had already forgotten.

Her heart was pounding furiously— how many seconds did she have before the next strike? Was it better to get as high up as she could, or was that more dangerous? She needed to do something, everyone was looking at her,

She screamed again, and threw her right hand in the air, left hand gripping on the dome for dear life,

CRACK

She didn't remember letting go. She fell into a mess of hands (and may have knocked someone in the face with her foot). Peter had his arms around her, voice weary as he said,

"Having fun?"

Kat grinned back at him.

Chapter 9

morning of Lagos

It must have been close to 4am, and everyone was gathered in a multicolored den. One of the walls had a gentle firelike quality.

Kat sat mesmerized by the sheen on the glass that moved from yellow to orange, red and back. Red patterned carpets adorned the floors, with comfortable cushions in a variety of deep reds all over the floors.

Several hookahs and tea sets passed between the large group of exhausted party goers.

"I always felt Ashe was so lazy," Jace was saying to Parker, "I never fit in there. All my cousins— huge family— would gather every weekend, and they would just sit there. Eat the same foods, talk about the same things, gossip and babies"

Parker chuckled.

"Then I started dating this girl, and all she ever wanted to do was lay there, too. Literally, every day. She wanted me to lay in the sun after school".

"Sounds perfect," smiled Carter.

"It wasn't. It wasn't though."

"Let people lay around," laughed Logan "It's a slippery slope, talking like that. Keep it up and you'll be supporting old Donald's work rations project".

“What a scraggly dude”.

“No, no,” Jace shook his head “I don’t really care about how much other people work, they can do whatever they want. / just want to do something, you know? I just want to move. I just want to make something”

Carter shook his head. “You’re missing the essence of chill”

“If you’re so chill,” responded Jace, “what are you doing here?”

Carter smiled. “I seem fine enough”

Brendon reached for the hookah in front of her, and took a few sips before passing it to Lane,

“Work minimums are seen as antiquated but I don't know. Seems like a reasonable social contract”

“But it comes down to a question of enforcement,” said a girl who was curled in his arms, “an even doing something more or less impartial requires so much energy and consensus, plus processing power”.

“We have the processing power,” Brendon replied,

“I'd value it in another direction,” she yawned.

Kat was falling asleep. Everyone's voices were falling together in a welcoming haze, and the hookah smoke had gone to her head.

She sank down into the cushions and let her eyes fall on the glass lamps, shimmering like fire, suspended from the ceiling above.

Someone tapped her shoulder.

"I hate to be the bearer of bad news," said Peter, "but this fine establishment has informed us that there's about to be an abundance of daylight, and they'd like for us to enjoy it fully".

Logan chuckled. "We're getting kicked out" he translated.

Both Logan and Peter offered to help her up.

Julia, who had joined the group just a few hours ago, came up to Kat with surprising warmth, "it was a pleasure to meet you. Here's to many opportunities to meet and deepen".

After a few more oddly sweet goodbyes, Peter guided a very sleepy Kat towards the entrance.

"I'll call us a nightcab," said Peter. Soon enough, a purple glass dome big enough for 4 or 6 riders whizzed up to them. "Turn transparent," he said to the cab as he stepped into it, pulling Kat onto a soft, purple cushion. The cab's tint faded into the night air around them, exposing the first glint of sunrise.

"This will only take us as far as the edge of Logos, because all cabs except medical convenience are banned in Ashe".

Kat stared at Peter.

"What?" he said, "the trains run as long as anyone needs them. Excessive cab use doesn't scale in urban environments. I know you're tired, dear. I think your energy will pick up".

Surprisingly, as the night cab went on its way, Kat did notice her energy start to pick up again, no doubt attributed to the morning twilight building all around her.

A dim glow outlined the varied shapes of gigantic Logal structures all around her. The nightcab negotiated its path amongst many whirling disks that seemed to be taking this hour to clean up and vacuum.

Kat yawned as the cab docked a Ferris wheel, filled with different shades of nightcabs.

"Here's our stop," Peter announced, just as the first rays of purple took to the horizon. "I took us close to the water."

Clumsily, Kat took Peter's hand as he guided her away from the ferris wheel, down several streets, and out into the open expanse of the ocean view. Kat marveled at the bluffs and cliff edges.

"Options," said Peter, "we have an abundance of those. We can walk, we can take the gondola home, and....well, I don't know, you probably couldn't bike safely in your state."

"My state?"

"I'm guessing Lane gave you a tonic to stay up all night,"

"Yes," blushed Kat, like she was getting Lane in trouble.

"Oh I had one, too, it's going to hit you stronger for sure."

"The gondola, if it's possible"

There was no line at this hour, before sunrise had really taken hold. They simply settled into an incoming small silver carriage. It's outside was embossed with a pattern of small circles, and it's inside was as soft as a cloud.

The sunrise blazed across the water and caught on the crescent first.

In one shape, like a sword flashing through the city, the peculiar curve of the city's crescent architecture reflected back the pinks, orange and magenta hues of the sunrise.

Kat found herself lost in the details of the hundreds of reflective windows. She noticed mermaids and spirals, domed architecture inspired from ancient nations, even a woman's face reflected across the surface of three buildings at once.

With the next wave of color, the whole city came into focus, and Kat could see hundreds of gardens and plazas, all the way to the mandalas and mountains of Verdant.

Peter smiled knowingly as Kat's eyes widened in wonder, as the sun crept up and illuminated every corner of this world she felt so lucky to see.

He smiled, "it's an honor to welcome you, Kat. I feel my own appreciation deepen with yours"

Peter expressed that he wanted to go home with some urgency, so they arrived at Kelsey's place around 7am.

Kat realized it was her first time here. What was Kelsey's style? How did she live?

Peter took them to a central district, bordered by three meters of tall, straight trees with thick leafy canopies overhead, and purple flowers cascading down.

Peter and Kat walked up a glistening path surrounded by sunflowers, approaching a white adobe structure.

A sleepy Kelsey met them at the door, who quickly woke up with peals of laughter.

"Oh my god, look at you— your hair! Kat, your hair!"

Kat touched her head self consciously, feeling the frizz from the dome's electricity.

“Well, I don’t have to ask where you were, or what you did,” continued Kelsey, raising her eyebrows, “I’m glad you had a good time!”

She hugged each of them ferociously, and led them inside the dome.

“Shoes off, please” she said to Kat.

Kat stepped into the small [name of room please. Foyer?!]. Coat hangers and shoe racks cozily covered one side, and the other was decorated with a variety of potted plants that spun slowly in midair.

Magnetic , thought Kat.

“Let's get you some food," she said, as she walked over simple earthen tiles, "So excited to show you our place, Kat. How do you feel after staying up all night?”

“Surprisingly okay,” Kat replied, slowly, “sort of like I’m dreaming or something.”

“It’s a nice feeling,” smiled Kelsey, "sometimes I miss the up-all-night haze, but once you see my bed, you'll see why I’m not that tempted”.

All the walls were curved in Kelsey’s house. Once they passed the foyer, they opened up in a circular kitchen with a wood fired oven . It was homey, and sweet.

"Maybe don't mention this much, but I copied a lot of designs from an adobe village on the outskirts of Verdant. I think it's cute". Kelsey waited until they sat themselves on the simple stools in the kitchen, then turned to both of them.

“I’m sorry I lost my temper last night,” she sighed, and then specifically to Peter “and thank you for taking care of Kat,”

“Of course,” he smiled, “we had a blast. What did you guys do?”, he asked, referring to Jaz and Zed.

“After our dramatic exit?” smiled Kelsey, “it was a bit more chill. We came here, gave Claire the night off. Listened to me rant for another hour, watched a movie. Zed took Jasmine home. Just that”

Kelsey looked from Peter’s eyes to Kat’s, “deep gratitude for everyone’s patience yesterday”.

Peter gave a wry grin, “you know there's always plenty for you”.

Kels blushed, then paused and looked up at him. “I can’t believe I’m still mad,”

“I know,” Peter chuckled. “Honestly, the whole party knows”. They both cracked up,

“I could get worse, I could make it a nationwide announcement”

“Make it your entire platform for Councilor”.

“No, better, tattoo “better than Brandon” on my face. So everyone knows”.

“That’s hot,” teased Peter. They laughed again.

“So, how are you doing, Kat?” said Kelsey, turning to her, bringing her into the fold. “Some food?”

Not feeling hungry yet, Kat told them she had to wash her hands, and she was directed into a bathroom a few curves away. Walking through the living room, her eye caught into a room whose door was open,

A large, white circular bed took center stage. Bordering it were giant colored daisies, potted all along the bed frame.

Hanging green vines with delicate yellow flowers dropped down like a chandelier from a huge skylight.

What a look.

Kat smiled. It was very Peter and Kelsey.

"Kat, you should come eat," said Kelsey's voice from outside the door. "I need to drop off Nico, and I want to show you something".

watching the kindergarden

Kat stood behind a two way mirror in a small corridor with Kelsey. Kelsey had asked the elementary school if they could observe a few classes, which apparently people did so often (for psychological research) that no one even bothered to check credentials anymore.

They'd watched Nico's class for a while, but then Kelsey took her to a later grade.

She observed a group of 8 year olds in a mini orchestra. Each had their own instrument; some had drums, others horns, some instruments that Kat had never seen before in her life.

One child stopped playing their instruments and the curly haired teacher came over and asked, "what's wrong?"

Kat heard the child whimper as they were off beat.

"Let's try again," said the teacher, with a patience that made Kat grateful she didn't pursue childhood education.

But the child continued to whimper, and refused to pick the instrument up again.

"What do you feel?" asked the teacher.

"I'll never get it! I can't! I can never get it— "

"Class, Jayce is having a hard time feeling like enough today. We all feel that way sometimes, don't we? Let's support him so he comes back to harmony"

The orchestra put down its instruments and started to clap in unison.

Then several voices chimed in, one after the other, I think you can play the music"

"I'll practice with you after class if you like"

"You can't help being bad!"

"Freddy, I don't think that was supportive," corrected the teacher.

"Maybe you couldn't hear okay? Was I being too loud?"

"You were just fine, too".

"Jayce, you have the harder instrument".

"You're doing a lot better than last week!".

Jayce stopped whimpering and reached out his hands

and they all joined hands.

They began to chant,

"there's more inside myself, than I can ever know,

I belong with all the earth,

And like the earth I grow"

The chant continued three times, and then the students held hands and ran in a circle.

Afterwards, they were all laughing.

"After a while," said Kelsey, "you learn this process will happen, and it's kinda annoying that it takes a while, so you just speed it up by doing it yourself. That way you can keep the music going".

frustrations with verdant

"I feel guilty," admitted Kat over lunch, "everyone seems very angry at Verdant because I don't know anything, but that's not fair".

Kelsey shook her head. "No, no, don't take that on— people are just taking out frustrations that are already there".

"I feel like I'm making Verdant look bad"

"Pshht, you're not scoring high on the list of things that are making Verdant look bad. It's a competitive field out there. People can be unreasonable everywhere, but it definitely spikes on the extremes.

Most people in Verdant want more spaciousness to enjoy what we already have. Makes sense, right?

But some people in Verdant reject anything and everything society has ever built, anything that has been processed by human machinery. Like surgeries denied to children because they are unnatural. But that's not even why people in Logal resent them so much.

Logal crazy, is like "like, hi, I'm 22 years old and I would like half the resources of the nation to build a gigantic glowing penis tower, because I discovered a new way to make things glow, and then I had a dream about a glowing penis". And when it's voted down, some of these people have the audacity to write a story that 'society doesn't support their dreams' or 'Verdant is holding them back' or whatever.

Kelsey put her hands in her head with frustration, and sighed, and continued her rant,

"And some of these 22 year olds, they sit down under a tree and go, wow, my construction plan really didn't have a sustainability amendment, or maybe there were simply other things that were necessary to build, or actually my glowing penis tower was not my best idea, and I will have others."

Her voice became even sharper.

And then there are others, who are *almost 40 years old* who have never said the words, 'I was wrong', to another person, ever in their life."

She stared off into the distance for a moment. Kat reflected, by proxy, that indeed most complaints weren't about the thing itself at all.

"Anyway, that's not on you, Kat, and it's really not on Verdant, either. Yeah, it's a little sad that some Verdant kids are kept isolated from society, and then they have a big awakening around 16-18. Some go straight back to Verdant, others start to integrate. Yes, you're often behind in technical thinking, and that can be rough, but you know, you'll catch up if you try. Universities do consider your background".

"I'm not from Verdant," said Kat, cautiously as if she truly had to remind Kelsey.

"It shouldn't be much different," replied Kelsey. "Don't be scared, Kat. I'm sure we will work it out"

Kat avoided her glance and stared at the floor.

"Look at you," said Kelsey, "you must be exhausted. Let's get you back to Jasmine's and fast asleep".

Chapter 10

song of repressed grief

When Kat woke up, she saw a note taped to her door.

"Gone swimming with Anna. Sad you can't swim. I'll be prepping orders all day, it's gonna be you and Kelsey today— she's gonna take you somewhere special today, Jaz 💞"

There was a knock on the door, "Kat?" rang Kelsey's voice.

She popped her head in the door.

"Ready for an adventure? This one is going to be just you and me. And a few others," she winked, as Nico ran in behind her.

Carter, Parker, Becca and Zed piled into Jasmine's place. They all made themselves comfortable as if they had been here endless times before, especially Zed, who opened up Jaz's elixir cabinet and started making all of them drinks.

Kat looked at them curiously.

"You're going to need something against sea sickness," he smiled, "but don't worry, I'll throw something in here to help you chill out, too"

"That's enough, Zed," said Kelsey.

"Enough for all of us, it's time for announcements," said Carter, who stood up and took a dramatic bow.

"Welcome aboard, lucky participants on the Carter Express. You, who have all somehow managed to get out of your responsibilities early today, are going to be taking a journey into the depths—"

"Oh my god," said Becca, rolling her eyes.

Everyone laughed.

"As I was saying," said Carter, regaining his composure, "today we are taking a self chartered tour of some of my favorite sights, ending at The River of Grief, also known as the Temple of the Void. This is going to get a little heavy, but we're going to be here to support one another. And we're still going to have as much fun as we can. Now, since we've all gone sailing before—"

"Yup," confirmed Kels, before Kat had the chance to say anything stupid.

"Our boat is currently parked on the shore in a nearby cove. We might even see Jasmine if she's nearby".

"Kat & I need 5 min to get ready," said Kelsey, "Can someone watch Nico?"

Parker raised his hand, and proceeded to pick up the boy.

Kelsey took Kat's hand and led her into Jasmine's bedroom. "We need to get one of Jasmine's dresses, because most of her stuff is waterproof. I don't think you have anything waterproof yet in your room."

Kat hadn't been in Jasmine's bedroom before. Frankly, she had assumed it was off limits, it seemed like a violation of privacy to be in here. Kat stole a quick glimpse at her space; a decorative mirror domed over half the space, and one of the corners boasted another tincture cabinet. *Another one, in her room ?* though Kat.

"Okay, this will fit you. Let's go. And, Kat, I don't think Jasmine would want you in here without permission, we just needed to grab something, ok?"

"Okay". Kelsey's retroactive permissiveness was no longer a surprise at this point. "Grab your backpack and anything you need", she said.

After enjoying the seasick-proof cocktails Zed had made for everyone, they all walked out along a lush trail to the beach. Howling monkeys danced in the trees around them, and bright red birds flew by in formations. Kat gathered some extra apricots and oranges and put them in her bag.

The path opened up to reveal the ocean, and Kat marveled as hundreds of people splayed out on the sand, swimming and sunning. She scanned for Jasmine and Anna, but they were probably too far away.

A beautiful blue sail boat was parked maybe 5ft from shore. Kat's heart started to race when she realized she would have to get into the water.

"Bring her in a bit, would you Carter?" asked Kelsey, no doubt noticing the same detail.

"That I can't do, but for the princesses who don't want to get their clothes wet, we do have solutions"

A glittering light poured out from the sail boat, cascading down to the dry sand below. It solidified into a bridge in a heartbeat. Without missing a beat, Parker jumped onto it, and crossed into the boat. Everyone followed suit. Kat noticed that Zed shadowed her as she was walking over the bridge, even standing into the water with his hands up, as if he knew she was scared of falling.

The boat had a glass bottom carved in a rippling pattern. Kat watched the shore with some apprehension. This was a new experience, for sure. There was, she realized, a small amount of panic building in her stomach because she was so far from shore, and she was confident not knowing how to swim was a contributing factor. The chatter of all of her companions faded into the background and became more of a distraction, than a source of comfort.

Becca, seeming to feel her, came over and asked, "May I hold your hand?".

Kat nodded as Becca's fingers slid around hers.

"It's totally normal to be frightened on a boat," she reassured her, "I always get scared of heights, too, even though part of me knows it's safe".

"Thank you," whispered Kat, as she felt herself relax a bit.

"I've been looking out for Anna and Jaz this whole time, but I don't see anyone," complained Zed.

"They probably ran a protective shield, so creeps like you can't see" teased Parker.

"Wouldn't put it past Jaz, but Anna?"

"First island!" yelled Carter, "coming up on the left. This is going to look way more impressive on the way back".

Outlines of steel jutted out in confusing curves high up out of the island.

"At night," whispered Kelsey, "it lights up in a beautiful display of dolphins, whales and fish, high up over the water".

"Wow," said Kat.

But the boat didn't even slow as they went past. The chatter continued. Kat saw another island up ahead on their right.

This island didn't seem to have any gigantic buildings on it, but as they got closer, Kat started to hear the sound of chimes.

"That's beautiful," she whispered to Kelsey, who raised her eyebrows, and covered her ears. The metal chimes, which had been so sweet from a distance, became relentless. Kat copied Kelsey and everyone else.

"Sorry," yelled Carter, "we saved some time by cutting it that close".

Kat pointed to the next island up ahead— "what does this one do?" she asked.

Everyone laughed. "It's just an island," said Parker, "or more accurately, it's preserved space".

"So it's a Verdant island?" Kat whispered to Kels.

"No," she said, "not technically, though as you can imagine, Verdant does fight to preserve space. Preserved space just means that no one builds on it, so the original beauty remains"

The boat's course was relentless. They were clearly on a mission, and also probably a time schedule unbeknownst to Kat. Up ahead lay an island surrounded by a thick, low hanging cloud.

"Here we go," said Zed.

The mist gently struck Kat as the boat crossed over, calming and cooling her from the sunny boat ride before. The boat slowed as they passed through it, and for a moment everything went white.

The mist became gentler and gentler as they got closer to shore, fading into a sweet haze, and Parker and Becca busied themselves with anchoring.

Zed hung out around protectively as she crossed over the bridge back to shore. Kat wondered how he knew she couldn't swim.

She gazed ahead at what looked like an ordinary jungle, but surely didn't feel like one. Had her vision become brighter suddenly? Her gaze fell upon five

leaves at the top of one of the trees, one of the leaves was bent. Did she normally notice things like this? Everything looked a little sharper, a little starker —

A small river beckoned over to them, and everyone began to approach it.

"Quick check," said Becca "Does everyone have waterproof shoes? There is a station to snag some nearby if not".

Everyone looked suspiciously at their own feet before confirming. Kelsey snuck a thumbs up to Kat.

"Here we go," said Becca, as she stepped into the river. "I'm going to go silent now".

The group waded upstream and started scrambling up the rocks. The mist became even thinner, almost romantic.

As they made their way up, two clearings appeared, one on the right and left.

In the clearing to the left appeared a cafe, and people gathered in small groups to share food. The only furniture were tea tables, low to the ground, surrounded by small cushions.

In the clearing to the right, a field of sparsely spaced people lay writing. There was one long, simple wooden table that was preferred by some.

On another table stacked a bunch of journals, and what appeared to be electronic tablets as well.

"We'll come back here," whispered Becca, pulling Kat's attention ahead.

Up ahead was a shimmering curtain, behind which lay another haze. It struck Kat both as attractive and nerve wracking. Becca nodded, then stepped right through. One by one everyone else began to follow her.

Niko started to wail. "Oh," said Kelsey, picking him up tenderly, "it's okay, my love". Kat picked up on a touching note of sadness in her voice.

"You go on ahead," said Kelsey to the group. "Nico is a sensitive kid. I'm not surprised. We will catch up when we're ready".

Becca nodded, "I'll look after Kat."

Kat resented that; she was a full grown adult. Also, she's been given specific instructions to not reveal too much to Becca, proximity would make that harder.

Becca stepped through the veil, and Kat followed suit. She was expecting it to feel cool, or electrifying, but oddly it was neither. A warm scratching sensation passed over her skin briefly, and she shook slightly.

Her gaze fell on the top of a waterfall, with colorful light falling on the source. The water opened up into a lake the size of a stadium, with walls that streamed from all sides. Kat frowned, because that wasn't the way she thought water worked usually.

The lake was filled with some sort of cards, like old CD cases lined up in a row. Kat squinted to see closer, some had moving images.

As they stepped deeper into the lake, she realized they were holographic images. Faces appeared from the cards, all blurry due to the water, some blurrier than others.

"They say they are charmed, so when it's your family, you are drawn towards particular cards," whispered Hunter, "but in case you're struggling with the natural charm" he said, voice dripping with sarcasm, "if you press your finger over there, it will guide you to your ancestors".

"Thanks," said Kat.

"It's crazy it's even legal to hide places like this until a Verdant kid is 16"

"It's okay," whispered Kat.

She gazed out to the shimmering faces beneath the waters, and walked through them slowly. When you gazed at one card, it came deeper into view, but from another angle the image faded completely.

Becca was a few steps behind her, and whispered "have you found yours?"

Kat put her finger to her lips to stall the question, and then stepped a little further away. Sorry, Becca, you're going to have to think I'm a stickler...

Somewhere, maybe 30 feet away, she heard a woman's voice start to sing.

The voice climbed in minor notes that rose higher and higher, then dropped into a mournful slumber.

Somewhere far behind her, a young girl's laughter rose alongside the music. Kat looked down and saw her hand being held. She closed her eyes.

A hollow, empty sensation pulled at her heart and she felt a sickness in her belly. She curled into a ball; loss permeated every fiber of her being. The room around her was dark, and a crack of light pouring through from a poorly closed door.

Behind it, she could hear a woman's sobbing. Her mother. Confused, Kat climbed out of bed and came closer to the door to hear.

Just a dream within a dream, Kat felt the hand of her sister on hers so briefly—then it vanished. Her mother's sobs continued in the distance.

Kat pushed the door forward a few inches.

Her grandmother sat with her arms wrapped around her mother, as she continued to sob.

"I am so sorry, Amber", she said, "She was your most precious, your first born, your everything. I am sorry it had to be this way."

"Kat!" Becca had grabbed her hand, startling her out of the trance.

Kat tried to speak and realized she must have been crying. Several people were looking at her, and her neck burned with shame. She was waist deep in the water of the lake.

"What's going on?" asked Kat, alarmed.

"That was the song of repressed grief," said Becca, "It got you good, huh". Becca peered into her eyes as Kat fought off tears. She held on to her hand.

"Do you want to talk about it?" asked Becca gently.

Kat swallowed, looking at her. Something in her wanted to spill out. She wanted to tell Becca how ashamed she was for being jealous of her dead sister ; how horrified she was to cause her mother another loss; and how maybe she was a terrible person for forgetting.

/// Request for feedback: is it obvious in the previous scene that Kat's sister had died, or no?

But that was off limits. Becca was sure to ask questions about her sister's medical condition, where she sought care. A young death blamed on Verdant could get attention.

Kat shook her head, and looked away.

Becca said softly, "I'll be here if you ever need me. I think you need to talk about it". She covered Kat's hand with her other, and Kat pulled away.

"What's going on here?" said Kelsey. Her voice was firm and calm, but Kat could read her concern.

"Nothing," said Kat.

Becca blinked, confused.

"I'll take care of Kat," said Kelsey, "thank you for your help, love. I think the two of us need a moment. Can you look after Nico for a bit?"

"Of course," said Becca, but her look of confusion stayed the same.

Walk with me , whispered Kelsey.

They stepped out of the lake, and towards the Banyan trees all around. They walked around them. Kelsey looked around a little bit, then put her hand on the tree. To Kat's surprise, a controls panel came up, and Kelsey pressed a button.

"It's a personal space bubble," said Kelsey, "people often have strong reactions around here. You're free to do whatever you want in public, but therapists often find these useful"

Kat stared at her in shock.

"What happened?"

Kat took a deep breath, and tried the best she could. "I don't know. Some woman sang a song and then suddenly I remember a bunch of.....um, stuff," she said lamely.

Kelsey raised her eyebrows.

"Stuff with my sister. She died when I was young". Now Kelsey's eyes went wide. "Becca was trying to help, but I didn't want to say anything to her, I thought it might make Verdant look bad and cause trouble".

"Good instinct," applauded Kelsey.

"Thanks," said Kat, feeling some pride. But Kelsey's look remained sober.

"After council, you're going to have to navigate this, Kat. The song of repressed grief is painful for everyone, but if it knocks you out like that, there's something really going on".

Kat nodded.

"I'm sorry about your sister," Kelsey said, as she came over and nodded at her, "sorry about the harsh love, too. I really care"

"I know," said Kat, hugging her back.

"You're going to need to do some damage control," said Kelsey, "Come to Becca and say, you're not ready to chat about it now, but once you get to know her better, you really appreciate the offer. That will keep her calm, and not guessing. She's used to people being pretty open with her"

"I can see that," said Kat. They returned to the group.

As they were heading back to shore, Kelsey took a small pen out of one of Carter's cupboards and snapped in half. Purple sparks flew up out of it and traveled for what looked like a mile, before it formed the letters "Jaz, back soon",

which disappeared in a crack.

"They are illegal to use in the city," explained Zed, "but boats use them out here to communicate with shore and one another. Sometimes you see people use them in the mountains, and no one cares".

"How far can a message travel?"

"Variable, but about three miles. That can be a matter of life and death".

Kat nodded.

"How's it going with Jasmine?"

"I love her place. Why didn't she come with us today?"

"She had to work," Zed said, frowning.

Kat dropped the subject.

"Zed! Kat! Come over for a photo," yelled Becca, saving them both.

Zed walked over. When no one was looking, Kat pocketed one of the spark pens. It was hard to calm down her heartbeat after that.

grocery store dream

That night as she slept she imagined herself back home working in one of the shabby grocery stores. She was surrounded by cucumbers, bananas and piles of dry noodles and pastas, cans of tomatoes. She carried a clipboard with the number of items labeled;

14 cans of olive

40 tins of olive oil

30 packages of rice

She set down the clipboard, and knocked into one of the cabinets, that transformed into a holding vessel for the lute that Jasmine played, and Kat

picked up and played it perfectly. Her new friends and acquaintances from Lagos, trickled in one by one.

Kat set the lute down in surprise,

Jace came in first, ushering everyone into the grocery store like a tour activity.

"Welcome to Krall, ladies and gentlemen. Here we have a fine and shabby market where our friend Kat is working. You'll find a fascinating assortment of fresh and frozen products; many residents here find this nourishment completely sufficient. As an educational activity, we can gather items here and cook a meal together"

Jasmine picked up the can of olives and said "what, have you never had fresh ones, Kat?"

She handed olives down the line to Lane who threw them to, Greg, Paul, Kevin, Brandon, Kesley, Peter and Zed.

Paul took Lane's hand and twirled her down the aisle. They began to float down the aisle.

"The paper towels on these shelf, they are reflected in your eyes" Kat heard him whisper.

"Halt!" said Kevin.

All at once, everyone else began to break open the cans and throw their contents on the ground.

"It's essential to examine the properties on olives," she heard Brandon saying, far away, his voice going lower, "we don't know their implications for transportation."

Zed came over to Kat and held her hand, "this isn't what you're used to, is it?"

"Let's dance one with you, too, Zed, come on" said Jasmine, pulling him away.

Zed's cold, comforting hold on her hand was too visceral for a dream. *Was this real?* she began to wonder.

She could feel his hand holding hers, even as he walked off with Jasmine. When she woke up, the sensation was still there.

Kat didn't wake up the next day until noon, and only by Jasmine's knocking at her door.

Jasmine entered with a steaming beverage and offered it to her, and sat on the side of her bed.

Kat shifted in the silk and gazed at her sleepily. She felt the pen hidden beneath her pillow, followed by a stab of guilt.

"Thank you," she whispered to Jasmine, gingerly sitting up and taking a sip of the beverage. taking the beverage.

"From what I heard, it makes sense you need rest," said Jasmine.

"Yeah," said Kat, not wanting to get into it. "It's...it's an amazing place," she mumbled, "Do you like it?"

"I love it," said Jasmine softly, "it's a work of art. I wish I went."

"You were busy?" asked Kat, happy to take the attention off herself.

"Yeah, and just" said Jasmine, taking a turn at feeling uncomfortable, "Zed was gonna go, and you know, it's just kind of..." she trailed off.

They both sat silently for a moment. Kat thought Jasmine was about to press on when she asked instead, "Do you think you could be ready in the next hour

or so? I have something special planned for you”.

dress shop

Jasmine turned the key of the red rose that served as the doorknob of her shop, and ushered Kat into the shop that had been her first impression of Mililac.

"What a model for my designs", Jaz said as she smiled, ushering Kat into the shop that had been her first impression of Mililac .

There weren't many places that Kat had the pleasure of seeing multiple times, and her first was that the splendor seemed even more glorious now.

That makes sense, she thought. Her first time, she was scared, tired. Now she was rested. She noticed more.

Her eyes traced the gentle embossed patterns on the cream colored walls that highlighted Jasmine's rich, colorful dresses. A rainbow of options lay before Kat in a dizzying rich, metallic glitter.

"Well, what calls to you ?" asked Jasmine, a little impatiently.

More sleep , thought Kat, but she dismissed the intrusive thought with a simple "I'm not sure".

"We don't have time to create something from scratch," said Jasmine, "but I'll modify it for your frame and personality".

When Kat still didn't speak or move, Kelsey stepped in.

"I think we may need to narrow down the options, Jaz", she said softly.

"Or this could be an exercise in choice," said Jasmine relentlessly, taking on a serious tone "I have made 30 options here for you to choose from. There are truly an infinite number of options, but here you get to choose from just 30. That's narrowed down."

"There is also the option to run away, or roll your eyes," mocked Kelsey, "or to choose to wear a paper bag".

Kat struggled to stay on task, she found her mind kept wandering to the scene from yesterday's temple.

"I like this red one over here," she said, snapping into attention and choosing the first thing her eyes landed on.

"Let's have you try it on"

Clothes in Krall were more issued than chosen. There wasn't a lot of variety, but people still added their own styles and choices. When she was younger, she used to braid the top of her shirts, and cover it up with a sweater, in case someone saw.

Jaz ushered Kat into her dressing room.

"Can I offer some advice?" yelled Jasmine, as she was changing.

"Sure"

"If you're open to it, I would like to amend the sleeves, I think you'll look better with a shorter option".

"Everyone has a different relationship to choice," mused Kelsey, as Jasmine quickly drew some options for sleeves on a nearby wall "Some people find it

comes naturally, some narrow down option by option, others really struggle to decide".

"Yeah I see this on the dance floor" nodded Jasmine, as she drew petal sleeves along side some flutter ones.

"It's funny that it's different for everyone".

"We don't strive for uniformity"

"But the faster you can make your own choices, the more prolific a designer, no?"

"Maybe," frowned Jasmine, "I think everyone struggles with choice on some level. I do," she added, to Kat's surprise.

Kat gazed at herself in the mirror as she listened. Her eyes instinctively went to the faint freckles on her chin, the slightly too busy eyebrows and her square jawline. Then she stepped back.

"Jasmine, what does this mirror do?"

"What? It's a mirror, Kat"

"Does it do the same things that Lane's does?"

"Oh! Yeah, that's her prototype. I want to install it soon"

"So what's with this mirror?"

"Kat, it's just a mirror!"

"Why does it look so good then?"

Jasmine and Kelsey burst out laughing. "It's just good lighting," replied Jaz, "Do you want to step outside?"

"I want this red one," Kat claimed, boldly, just as she heard the door open to herald a new customer.

She turned to pull the curtain open when she heard,

"Councilwoman Skye!" she heard Kelsey exclaim.

Kat heard a warm, older voice respond, "Kelsey Nathene, look how much serendipity"

"And this must be Daphne," replied Kelsey, "who I've heard so much about"

Daphne must be her daughter?

"Welcoming abundance, Jasmine," she heard a younger voice say, "thank you for creating this space"

Kat grabbed a handful of the velvet from the dressing room curtains, just in case anyone pulled it open accidentally. She didn't fully understand what was happening, but it definitely didn't feel good.

"Looking forward to hearing your motion on Sunday, Kelsey. I would encourage you to fill in the contents of your motion soon, even if it's going to evolve"

"You're right, councilwoman. We've just—"

"Be mindful not to abuse your responsibilities, Kelsey, the rules still apply to you"

Kat shivered in her red silk dress. She heard Jasmine busy herself with taking Daphne's measurements, and heard Kelsey and the Councilwoman discuss a

confusing personalization project in great detail. After maybe thirty minutes of hiding in the dressing room, she heard the door close again.

Jasmine's voice came in close to her, "I'm so sorry, Kat, I forgot about Daphne. Want to step out?"

Kat nodded. "Yes" she piped up, realizing Jaz couldn't hear her. She opened the curtain.

The light cascaded onto the metallic red dress she had chosen, with embroidered sunflowers shining out in all directions.

"You look beautiful," said Jaz, beaming. "Doesn't she, Kels?"

When she didn't get a response, she turned to see Kelsey sitting with her head in her hands. Kelsey rubbed her temples and stared at the floor.

"What's wrong?" frowned Jasmine.

"I'm just, I just hope I haven't gone too far" Kels muttered.

"So why did you put the motion blank?" frowned Jasmine.

"Chairs often reserve council time, in anticipation of building challenges that are likely to come up," explained Kelsey, in a direct evasion of Jasmine's question.

Kat and Jasmine exchanged a look. It was too heavy to say out loud.

Some part of Kelsey was taking Kat's concerns seriously. Kat struggled with a mixture of gratitude, and guilt.

"You sure you want to take me to council?" said Kat, tentatively, more for Kelsey's sake than her own.

“Yes,” said Kelsey, “Kat, there are outsiders, and they are like you. I can’t unlearn that. It’s not just about you. We need to develop integration. If you can get in, others can, too. We need to do this right. It’s clear we can’t keep this at bay forever”.

Kat hoped that Kels was right, for both of their sakes.

Chapter 11

jasmine gives lute, design conversations

When she woke up the next morning, she saw Jasmine seated in a meditative posture, gazing out into the forest.

She smiled as Kat approached.

"Morning of the abundant sun, Kat."

"Abundant with joy," Kat replied, the words giving pleasure as they rolled off her tongue.

"It's been really nice having you with us," she smiled, "You know, I've been thinking about you, and what would bring you comfort, and be good for your development. I mean, I think it would be good for your development..... you know, what do I know? But you'll love this. Close your eyes," Jasmine instructed.

Kat obliged.

"Open" squealed Jasmine.

Her hands held a wooden & mother-of-pearl embossed wooden instrument that was about two feet tall.

"This is a Laom; it's friendly. It's good for beginners. It's yours to keep."

Jasmine smiled at Kat's shock.

"And consider," she added, "would I get you a gift if I thought they were going to cast you off into the woods tomorrow? And I already have too many instruments, so you know, so it's not a trick"

Jaz winked.

"Thank you," said Kat, "but I can't accept this— you've already given me so many gifts."

"Nonsense, Kat"

"You got me the dress yesterday!"

"Are you suggesting a limit to my gift giving?" asked Jasmine, on a playful note. "I wouldn't do that if I were you".

Kat laughed.

"It really is a lot".

"I promise it's not that much. You've been inspiring me to reflect a great deal," she said, looking out into the jungle.

"Thank you"

"Are you ready for your big day?"

"Yes" said Kat, thinking of the dance tonight with alarm.

"I remember my first one and how excited I was. I was a terrible dancer back then. Anyway, I should journal for a bit".

"Of course," said Kat. "Jasmine— would you recommend something for me to read this morning?"

Jasmine smiled.

"Okay. Have you read much about elemental design? It's about the elevation of earth, water, fire and air in all man-made spaces. Including air—expansiveness. No one likes small spaces that close in on you".

"no, of course not," said Kat.

Jasmine walked over to a set of encyclopedic tomes "Amelia's Design Principles" that had the titles: Balance, Emphasis, Proportion and Scale, Contrast, Rhythm and Movement, Repetition, and Negation.

"That might be a bit much," frowned Jasmine. She climbed up to a higher shelf, and then brought Kat a friendlier volume.

"Try 'The Symbolism of Harmony', I happen to really enjoy it"

Kat opened up the first page

All around us is an infinite repetition of certain patterns, phrases. The designer that understands this can make order out of infinity, and summon infinity into order.

"Happy reading, Kat", said Jasmine, "I'll be in my office for the next few hours. Before we leave, I'll give you a lesson on the lute— I just can't right this second. Enjoy the book!"

THE dance scene

Kat took a deep breath in her dress. It was wild how comfortable it was.

"Now remember", said Jasmine "you have three opportunities to light up. Afterwards, it's going to be so dull it won't be worth it. You can charge up in the bathroom, but that's hardly worth it. I don't want you hiding in the bathroom under the pretext of charging your dress," she said, sternly.

They walked down a low rumbling corridor that was dark and granite, and opened up into the most kaleidoscopic majesty that Kat had ever seen.

The dome could have easily fit over 3,000 people. Slowly moving stained glass rotated above them, creating a mesmerizing pattern of light in all directions.

Pairs twirled and danced through the venue, somewhere circles erupted in cyphers and in other spots threesomes and quads danced in playful configurations.

All around the side were white couches.

"You said this place was 50 years old. How do they keep them so white?"

"Smart materials" said Jasmine smartly, "The drinks do spill every now, but the seats clean themselves".

Jasmine wore white & gold herself, everything wrapped in an intricate arabesque pattern that accented her waist and neckline. Her skirt twirled in her signature style.

Kat's heart pounded as she looked around. Thousands of beautifully dressed men and women, living ornamentation, seemed to flow seamlessly with one another.

"You know, deep down, I know Anna's right about so many things," said Jasmine, "it's excessive, everything inside this dome. But — god, I love this, Kat."

Kat reflected on Jasmine's prior instructions; worry about nothing, take deep breaths when you need to.

"That's really all you need to do Kat, you are so set up".

"May I have this dance?" asked a boy with short blonde hair and a welcoming smile, in Kat's direction.

"Perhaps our first of so many," said Kat, as Jasmine had taught her. Jasmine smiled as she watched her go off.

"And *that's* why it's so interesting to work on 3LT, because it underlies all the communication systems; why impact the design of one project when your designs can be used every time someone makes a phone call, or sends a message. Are you familiar with RFP protocols?"

"Of course," said Kat, nodding her head. She was struggling. Jasmine had instructed her to promptly leave each dance saying, "I look forward to our next", but Charlie had intercepted her and asked to bring her a drink as well.

"It's a completely last generation system," continued Charlie, earnestly, "soon enough P5RFP is going to take over completely, and anyone well versed in that will be position to impact the market"

"Oh, really?" replied, Kat, half heartedly.

"Yes, the speed of communication will go up 10x and with that we may be able to field more emotional nuance, voice and replica."

"What inspired you to enter that field?" asked Kat, with one of her good-to-go questions, while most of her attention was considering the right moment to

leave.

"Enough about me, Kat, I've been rambling and I know it, sweet of you to let me, but I'd love to learn about you" said Charlie, smiling "What field are you working on?"

"I was raised in Verdant." said Kat, downing the last of her glass in one gulp, "And I'd love to tell you more about my field now, but then we wouldn't save much for next time would we? I'd love to tell you after our next dance".

She smiled and left, knowing that Charlie was probably a bit hurt by her behavior, but if she was lucky, there would be a next time. Three steps later she was intercepted by her next dance.

This could be fun, she said as she swirled around, admiring the grace of her new dance partner. She could get used to this.

Four dances later, she collapsed, exhausted, on one of the brilliant white couches. She nursed a beverage that promised to bring her back to life. Part of her felt bad for abandoning all her partners, another part enjoyed the power to come and go as she pleased. She gazed out into the dance floor and saw Kelsey and Peter, dancing together with joy. Kelsey waved when she saw her gaze upon her.

Jasmine collapsed on the couch next to her, "how is it?"

Kat smiled, "it's fun"

Jaz bloomed. "This is where I feel most at home" she confided "I prefer dancing with people to talking, honestly. If we always danced, I would probably spend less time alone"

It suddenly dawned on Kat that if she wasn't in her house, Jasmine might be spending much of her day alone.

"You know, here, I feel like I understand people. My dance partners. I feel like I know them, I can read who they are, how they move," confided Jasmine.

"But it doesn't always translate, you know. Sometimes someone can seem so confident here, but outside the doors they have no idea what they are doing.

Or they can be so receptive, responding to every one of your movements, but in real life you feel invisible, like everything you say falls on deaf ears. They can be so careful during the dance, and careless elsewhere.

So, what's real? Which one is the mask? I don't know, Kat, I really don't"

Kat was silent. Jasmine was using the same tone of voice with which she'd told her about Clara, distant. Eerie.

"Anyway," Jasmine changed gears, quickly "sorry to get lost there. So who did you dance with?"

"Four people already! One right after the other. It's tricky excusing myself before they ask me to get a drink".

Jasmine smiled, "nice problem you have there".

"Yeah", Kat blushed, "I guess it's a good one. Thanks for making the dress, Jaz. It's really beautiful".

"Thanks, love. Oh!— Jasmine exclaimed suddenly, her eyes catching something on the other side of the room, "I'll catch you later, Kat".

"May I have this dance?" said a high-pitched, confident voice. Kat looked up to see Lane smiling at her.

"Lane!" said Kat, hugging her.

"I'm here with Greg tonight, but he's on another dance right now. Come on, I won't bite", said Lane. Kat wondered if anyone had ever told Lane 'no' in her entire life.

"I'll lead, I'm good at it" she said, spinning Kat around.

"Listen, Kat," Lane said, as she pulled her into a close embrace, "You look good in Jaz's designs. But you're spending too much of your time with her."

Kat looked at Lane, confused.

"She's a great designer. She's got a good flow. And I'm sure she's a good mentor. But you need to find **your** way, **your** style. You can't just be Jasmine's mannequin for the next few years—"

"Oh it's not—"

"I would know, okay. Most of my teens I spent in a relationship with someone older than me. I dunno if you and Jaz have a thing. It's fun to follow someone else's flow. But I know you have it in you. Figure out what YOU want. Now's the time".

Lane kissed her on both cheeks, "I'll see you soon".

Kat wandered off, confused. She danced with another boy, then saw Charlie watching her in the distance and turned sharply, he was taking too much of an interest.

"Need some help?" she looked up to see Zed's smiling face. "I'll take this dance".

"Thank you so much". Zed's familiarity was a comfort, after so many new players.

"Have you been up to the balcony yet?"

"Not yet,"

"I'll take you there'

Zed and Kat climbed a golden staircase on the outside of the building and entered up on the second story.

From there you could watch all the dancers from above, as the kaleidoscopic lights shone on to them.

"How many of these dances are there?"

"Ballrooms this size, or this formal? Less than half a dozen. But dances erupt everywhere"

"Oh, there's Jasmine!" pointed Kat, enthusiastically,

"Yes, she's easy to spot from above".

"Who is she with?" asked Kat, "She's been with the same partner for three dances now."

Kat watched Jasmine's face, flushed and glowing, as she leaned into and clasped her elbows around the neck of a blonde man with curls. He lifted her up and spun her.

"Ah." Zed sighed, "this again. We should head downstairs".

Kat nodded.

Zed came downstairs and sat down at one of the small round tables on the edge of the dance floor. He made small talk with Kat, sharing tidbits about other dancers.

10 minutes later, Jasmine came over to the two of them, carrying two drinks.

"Evening of the abundant moon," she smiled, greeting them with a kiss on both cheeks. She was still dancing side to side as she walked. "Where's Michael? He was going to meet us over here"

"I saw him leave," said Zed.

"What?" Jasmine paused. She looked confused. "Oh. Okay"

Absently, she pushed her second drink into Kat's hands. Kat was confident it wasn't intended for her.

"You know how it is, Jaz"

"Why would he leave?" she frowned

"Probably to his girlfriend"

"Right." said Jasmine, dazed. "Right." She took a deep breath "Yeah".

Zed took her by the elbow, "Come on, Jaz, you know better. Let's take a moment. Let's go outside, let's get by the fountain, that's sure to cheer you up".

"Yes," said Jasmine, her voice sounding hurt "Thank you. Thank you for being there."

"I'll get her home. Get back safe, Kat" said Zed.

convo with Kevin

This is so classic , realized Kat, watching them walk off with deep frustration.

She was now alone at a dance, in charge of getting herself home, when she had been lectured, at length, on how critical it was for her to shadow Jasmine all night. Kelsey was nowhere to be seen, either.

Everyone makes a big deal of me doing anything alone , Kat fumed, *and then abandons me at the first inconvenience.*

All week, walking outside to a cafe was deemed dangerous, and now Jasmine had left Kat dressed like a phoenix in the middle of a ballroom of extremely curious revelers.

Should she go home? Of course she knew the way, but she was worried that dressed like this, she was going to attract attention no matter what. Best to be wandering around with all the other over-the-top flowers.

"May I have this dance?" — it was Kevin. "I saw Jaz & Zed go off. You looked a little confused. That happens." He said, helpfully.

Kat sighed, and decided that Kevin was as trustworthy as they came.

"Jaz made such a big deal about us leaving together, but she forgot about it on a moment's impulse".

"Jaz is complicated. She's being a bit of an older sister to you, isn't she?"

"Yeah"

"It's hard when you've been raised your whole life in Verdant. Some of them really believe the sheltering is for their own good, but it often falls apart in the teens. What happened that inspired you to expand out?"

Kat took a deep breath, and twisted the truth.

"There was someone I really liked. And I thought very highly of him. I thought he believed in me, too. But then he just left without a trace."

Kevin looked down on her compassionately, "I'm so sorry you had that experience."

They continued to dance together for a few more minutes.

"So you could have lived where you were, with that disappointment," said Kevin, "or distracted yourself by asking— what else is out there for me?"

"More or less".

"Totally understandable," said Kevin, "very relatable."

He stopped as the music ended. "This city is perfectly safe. I'd encourage you to explore. But if you want, I'll walk you home".

"I'll take the walk," said Kat, gratefully, "Thank you".

Kevin was an amiable companion, chatting up Kat on all manner of Mililac history, tensions and inventions as they walked home. When she hugged him goodbye, and walked through the door, she could hear muffled voices in Jasmine's room.

Chapter 12

zed blackmail ride

In the morning, Kat woke up and wandered over into Jasmine's kitchen. She made Jasmine's signature morning ritual beverage and watched the waves in the distant horizon.

Jasmine wasn't awake yet, which made sense cos she'd probably been up late.

She heard a ping come from somewhere in the kitchen. She walked back. Probably Kelsey, letting her know the plan for today.

I know where Carter's missing flare is 😊. We should talk asap, Kat. Meet me outside Jasmine's place in thirty . Bring a jacket.

Kat's heart raced. Fuuuuck. She should have never, ever taken that stupid thing. She was on something. How the hell did Zed find out about that?

She pulled up a note pad and wrote to Jasmine,

Jaz, I'm so sorry~ I had to go take care of something with Zed. I'll be back asap.

Then she grabbed her jacket, sat back down and tried to do every breath calming exercise that Jasmine had ever taught her. None of them worked.

She stepped outside and saw Zed perched on a motorcycle with huge tires outside. He pulled his hair back from his face and grinned at her. Kat noticed he wore his shirt half open, muscles defined beneath it.

"Get on", he said. Kat obeyed. She wondered if these cycles were allowed on the Mililac sidewalks or if Zed just didn't care. They moved towards Verdant, towards the mountains. He picked up speeds rolling around the curves, and Kat squeezed tightly, feeling this process was very intimate. Kat leaned in for their balance, silently placing her prayers that neither of them would die. She wondered where they were going, and what Zed wanted to show her in Verdant.

They moved past the mass of mountains that Kat had visited before, higher up into the hills. Kat had been making a game of identifying Verdant villages, but it was getting harder and harder.

Finally Zed stopped.

"Get off gently," he said, "left foot grounds, right foot dismounts. Okay, we can speak freely here, Kat"

Zed put his hand on her shoulder, and looked at her for a moment.

"I know where you're from".

Kat said nothing.

"Kat, you can trust me. I know you're from Krall. It's obvious to anyone with the right context. Most people don't have that"

Kat stood, willing her face to be blank, and her body still, if only because she couldn't come up with another course of action.

Zed sighed.

"Listen. I was close to my uncle growing up. Don't you think it's weird that no one talks about traveling outside of Mililac? It's not in the culture "

Kat's face betrayed a look of genuine confusion.

"Exploring, Kat. Seeing what's beyond. There's a quiet culture of confinement here. Have you not noticed?"

There was silence.

"There's a lot to explore here," said Kat, finally.

"Well, my uncle went beyond the borders. He never came back. They say he died abroad."

Kat broke.

"He probably did," she said, "If he wandered into Krall, they would have killed him."

"I'm inclined to think it was an inside job".

"Well, be inclined to whatever you like," snapped Kat. Then followed up with, "I'm sorry. I'm sorry about your uncle."

"They are going to take you into council tomorrow, the two of them."

Kat nodded, thinking of Jasmine and Kelsey. "They think council will help."

"Do you think that?" asked Zed, looking her in the eyes.

Kat stopped, stunned.

It was beautiful , she thought, *how intense he looked at this moment* . His eyes were full of care, and protection. *This must be what they see* , she thought, thinking of Kelsey and Jasmine. No, she didn't trust council. Part of her wanted to cry and yell, "thank you".

But she took a deep breath.

"Jasmine trusts council" she replied.

"Jasmine trusts everything!" yelled Zed, his intensity now more alarming than attractive.

He stepped closer, "She's naive. You know that, right? You see that. She's clueless. She can't really grasp what other people are thinking, what they want, what they'd do."

Kat looked away. What Zed was saying was not kind, and she didn't want her face to show tacit agreement.

"You go to council, tomorrow Kat, you won't have the next week. It was nice knowing you, I'll say."

Kat looked up to his flashing eyes and looked away again.

"Here's a hot take, Kat. You really think you're the first person in 200 years to make it across that paltry border? You think you're some kind of pioneer?"

Kat glared.

"People live here. From Krall. From everywhere. In these hills, in Verdant. It's more modest than the city, but they have everything they need. People like me make sure of that."

"Wait," said Kat, her resolve breaking with curiosity "Is there a boy who arrived here from Krall? In the past month?"

"What?"

"Brown hair, green eyes?"

“What— no, no one— I mean, I’m not sure, there could be”.

Kat narrowed her eyes. His first response had betrayed a real no. Now, it was pretty obvious at this point that he’d just say anything.

Zed continued, “You could live your life free, here, Kat. You could be with your community.”

At that, something in her belly twisted.

"Jasmine and Kelsey are my community!"

"You've known them for less than two weeks!"

Kat shook her head. Her eyes swam with tears as she thought about how she felt on the lavender streets and how kind everyone had been to her....

"It's just material things down in Ashe, Kat. Just a flashy party."

Kat shook her head, "it's more than that."

“Maybe it would be easier on Kelsey, if you stayed here? Have you ever thought of that?”.

Ouch. Maybe he was right. Kat’s head swam as she flopped between options. On one hand, she agreed with Zed on a few things, and one of them being that this whole situation was extremely suspicious. She doubted her reveal would go well for Kelsey. But that was Kelsey’s will, and Kelsey’s choice. Both Kelsey and Jasmine would be hurt and angry if Kat didn’t come back. She hated thinking about that. But maybe it was really best for them.

Kat evaded Zed’s glare and looked around. She loved it up in the mountains, but being confined to them was another story. And Zed had already betrayed there was no chance that Travis was here. But maybe he was wrong?

“What would we tell Kelsey?” she asked Zed.

“That you ran away”.

“What would she tell council ?”

“One of her lies, I don’t know”

That wouldn’t do. Kat swallowed, and with determination said "I'm enough. I want to build in Mililac".

Zed shook his head angrily. "Where'd you get that line, a kindergarten? This is so dumb, Kat. I’m trying to keep you safe"

He glared at her angrily.

"You think you're so different from the other runaways, huh? You’re so attached to Kels and Jaz? Jesus, just give it two weeks, you'll be just as attached here."

Kat was starting to actively dislike him.

“What would I even do here?” she asked.

“Nothing,” said Zed, “you’d be staying away from everyone, that’s the point. What do you think you’d do in Ashe?”

Now she was starting to hate him. Why did he have to say it like *that* ?

“You’re ten years behind everyone in education. You realize that right? Even if they let you stay, which they won’t, you’re always going to be on the outside looking in”

That’s enough. Maybe it was stupid, but she refused to believe there was any chance Zed was right. She imagined what Kelsey would do in the situation, and

tried to mirror her cool confidence.

"Thank you for offering this possibility," she said coldly, "it is a beautiful one. I stand with Kelsey, and Jasmine. Together we can create more possibilities to explore."

"Keep drinking the kool aid, Kat," said Zed, not bothering to hide his annoyance, "Sorry I tried to help. Come on, I'll take you back then. I have places to be."

Kat nodded, feeling awkward holding on to him so closely when they were clearly so mad at each other. But she was so grateful to be going home. Or going back to Jasmine's. Whatever.

As the wind whipped by on the ride home, she tried to swallow down her anxiety that he was right. Anger kept her holding on to the bike, eager to get back. But she couldn't shake the feeling that she was really, really going to regret this decision.

None of the breathing exercises that Kelsey showed her ever seemed to really work.

But she tried. Counting to keep her mind busy until she began to take in more of the landscape. She held tight to Zed.

Zed stopped outside of Jasmine's house. He gave her the same instructions to get off again.

Then he paused and put a hand on her shoulder.

"I'll be at council tomorrow. Rest well." and then he paused.

In one motion, he pulled her really close to her and kissed her. His lips were soft and warm, and his hand snaked up her back.

Just a moment later, he let her go, said "take care of yourself", then gazed forward and took off.

Kat stepped back, dazed, confused. *What was that?* She turned to Jasmine's house and saw her standing in the doorway, with her arms crossed.

late night guilt struggle

In a flash, Kat realized what Jasmine must be thinking.

She ran up to Jasmine's outline in the door

"Jaz, it's not—"

Jasmine stopped her with a single gesture. "Some space, please"

With her hand still up, Jasmine stepped back. "It's fine," she said, in a voice that was dark, and slow, "it's nothing, Kat. I just need some space".

Kat stepped back as well, stunned. She didn't know what to do.

"Rest well," said Jasmine, her voice dark and slow "I'll see you in the morning". She paused at the doorway, "Guess the dress really worked for you".

She walked away and into her room.

Moments later, she could hear doors opening and closing, and a bath being poured. Music played in her room, but it didn't reach into the other rooms in the house.

Kat stood in front of the doorway.

Maybe I should leave now, she thought, slowly beginning to panic.

The door was open. Literally. Her friendship was closed. Her mind flashed through the logistics of leaving Jasmine's place. She had no idea how to get to Verdant, but she could look it up. Maybe if she started walking now, she could be there in the morning.

If she wasn't here tomorrow, would they send out a search party? Or would they just forget about her at that point.

Maybe she could figure out where Anna lived, but she couldn't go to Anna. She'd turn her into Jaz.

Fuck fuck fuck, she thought— she needed Zed, she needed to say she changed her mind. Then she groaned. Even if she figured out how to call Zed now, Jasmine would hear him pick her up. Goddamit it. She couldn't do that.

Kat began to chew on her cuticles. Just knowing how unwelcome she was in Jasmine's house right now made her stomach turn. She had been eager to get back and eat but now these actions felt impossible.

Okay, *take a deep breath*, she told herself. *One thing at a time*.

She needed to come in, she could have a calming elixir— she could look up a plan to get to Verdant. She took a step forward.

The door shut behind her. She whirled around, and touched the doorknob. It sparked.

"Ow! Goddamit it!"

Jasmine locked her in! THAT is where they were at. Jesus.

She walked around, tested the controls, gently touching the walls. Communication was down. She couldn't adjust the temperature in the living room, not that she was really inclined to. Kitchen— Jasmine had left that open. All the food was out.

Except for the fucking knife drawer? Everything in it was missing.

“What the fuck, Jasmine!”

Kat slid to the floor and put her hands on her head. She was starting to fade. Everything was going wrong and now she was trapped. She lay down on the floor of the kitchen, next to the stream that flowed through it.

Jasmine hadn't locked the elixir cabinet. Actually, it didn't have a lock, so that probably played a role. Kat grabbed everything that had a purple cap for calm and mixed it together in a full cup, and gulped the whole thing. Nothing here was dangerous, she'd said. Where was the dangerous stuff? Probably in her room. Probably she was on it now.

This is my last night, this is my last night here.

She should have taken a bath and eaten every strawberry. She should have read one of Jasmine's books cover to cover or just watched the waves from afar.

But she couldn't, she was so tired. She barely had the energy to get herself to bed.

Chapter 13

waking up, going to court

Kat woke up in a state of dread.

Yesterday had been bad. Today could be worse.

She touched the silk all around her, but she could barely take pleasure in it.

She couldn't face Jasmine, no matter how hungry or thirsty she was. She lingered in her room, trying to do the breathing exercises Jasmine and Kelsey had taught her. It was really unclear when their benefits kicked in.

Everything will be okay, she thought to herself. She'll talk to Jasmine. She'd exp— fuck, she couldn't explain, she realized. Wherever Zed had taken her, that was clearly a secret. If she explained, now she would be betraying him. *Fuck*.

Okay. *How does one create abundance in their own heart again?*

Deep breath, try again. She imagined breathing in a beautiful white light, how it fell onto her broken and heavy heart. Now it turns gold.

She was such a fucking idiot. She should have taken Zed up on his offer. What the fuck was she thinking?

Okay, okay trying again. White light, breathing in....

“Jaz? Kat?”

She heard Kelsey's voice in the kitchen. A fucking miracle. Kelsey was here!

She threw on a dress and stepped outside. Jasmine had come out of her room at the same stimuli. She looked dazed, tired. She averted Kat's eyes.

Kelsey frowned, and watched the two of them with concern,

"What happened here?"

"Nothing," said Jasmine, flatly. Kat nodded.

"O...kay" Kelsey looked from one of them to the other. "Has anyone had breakfast yet?"

No one responded. "Okay, we need to talk about whatever is going on, but in the meantime, we are on a tight time line. Peter and Zed are both waiting for us at the courthouse at 12pm"

"Great," said Jasmine, miserably.

"I need to eat something and so do both of you."

"I'll make coffee," sighed Jaz.

Kelsey made breakfast for all three of them, as Kat tripped over herself trying to help.

"Why don't you sit outside and meditate for a moment near Jasmine?" asked Kelsey.

Anything but that.

"I can help with the dishes," replied Kat.

Kelsey rolled her eyes. “I know you’re worried, love. If you like, I encourage you to shift your framing. It’s your presentation, your time....your moment”, she smiled encouragingly.

Kat stared down at her plate of colorful food thinking she was going to cry. On one hand, she needed to eat as much as possible, right now. On the other hand, she felt sick.

She stared at Kelsey as she ate. After a few minutes of this, Kelsey looked up and said, “it’s not your last meal, Kat”.

Jasmine came in from the balcony and went straight to her elixir cabinet. She gulped something straight from the bottle.

Kelsey raised her eyebrows and said, “you know, *I’m* very excited about today,” she said in a tone that betrayed a little hurt , “it’s going to be monumental”.

“Sorry” replied Jasmine and Kat, in unison.

Kat tried to seem cheery, or at least neutral, for the next few minutes, but she gazed mournfully at the sidewalk as they walked. She felt fake. Putting on a big smile of support for Kelsey now was the least that she deserved, but she just couldn’t put her heart into it.

Kat was going to be deported, she was sure of it. And it was all her fault for wanting too much.

She tried to take in every detail of the world around her, but her head seemed to hang down of its own volition. She stared at the ground. It was still beautiful. The glittering of the sidewalks as she walked along, the soft, squishy floor of the tea house, the black, shining marble as they walked up to the Hall of Reason and Judgement.

The lavender that bordered the path offered some sensory relief, as did the sweet poppies that grew randomly all around. She didn't marvel so much at the structures around her. Detachment ruled the world today.

They arrived at a beautifully patterned building of black, blue & white. It had a curiously long hallway that opened up into a large dome.

A statue of the founder of Mililac stood at the entrance, arms open in welcome. One of her hands was worn down.

They heard footsteps behind them, and Peter joined them. He examined the group, raised an eyebrow, then touched the statue's right hand, "for good luck". He held Kelsey's hand and reassured her, "you're going to be amazing today".

"Wait for me," Kat heard Zed's voice and cringed. Why was he insisting on showing up today? Kat looked at Jasmine, but her face was a forced blank.

"Let's take one deep breath?" Zed asked when he arrived, as they all instinctively held hands, "Okay, let's go".

Peter opened the large wooden doors, and they walked through.

Kat looked up.

The entire hall was mirrored, in a way so your reflection came back to you a hundred times.

Their footsteps clanked on the mirrored floor, so everyone began to walk slowly, gently.

Kat stared at her reflection with curiosity, confusion and shame.

She noticed Jasmine touch under her eyes, maybe she minded they were puffy. This didn't seem to be a fun experience for her.

Kat knew what Kelsey would say, that this was to encourage self-reflection. She found it nauseating.

She caught Zed smiling in the mirror. When the torturous hallway came to an end, they turned a corner to a small lobby with a few people talking in it. Kelsey approached,

“Kelsey,” smiled a man with long, white hair, “always a treat to see you. How is going handling the education personalization complaints?”

“It’s always a privilege”, laughed Kelsey, “at how many different things people come up with to complain about. But really. The more aware we are about potential downfalls, the more we can assure we take the right path”.

“I always admire your outlook. Is that the project that brings you in today?”

“No, no, I’m um— I’m here to introduce Kat”

“Kat?” smiled the man, a little confused, as his peers came closer.

“Sorry to interrupt,” stepped in a woman who looked like she wasn’t. She had dark skin, short, blonde hair and a stern demeanor, “Kelsey, I want to confirm the contents of your motion. Would your group come with me?”

She took them out of earshot of the white haired man and his peers, “I just reviewed your motion. A petition to naturalize Katherine Charlese, citizen of — you say Krall?”

“Yes,” said Kelsey, “I know it’s a little unusual”.

“Indeed. We are going to ask you to wait for a while. Sam will guide you to a waiting room”.

A man with plain clothes and a compassionate look on his face said, “right this way,” to the group, and guided them to a small wooden room. It had a little

fountain in the center.

"This isn't the main waiting area," commented Zed.

"No," frowned Peter.

"Maybe that's under repairs," shrugged Kelsey, "this is nice enough."

They took some seats. Everyone wished they had brought a card game.

"We could probably ask for chess, think we can ask for chess?" said Kelsey.

Jaz shrugged. "They'll probably call us any minute now."

But minutes dragged into hours. Everyone was getting hungry again, and the silence was uncomfortable. By this point, it had dawned on each of them that, normally, they would have filled the room with laughter by now.

"Maybe we should ask for cards," said Peter, finally, "I think I'll give it a go"

"Do you want to talk about it, Jaz?" said Kelsey, finally breaking the silence.

"About what?"

"I don't know what, you tell me what!"

"Kels, lay off, everything is fine"

"It's obviously not. If the court sees you like this, they are going to discount your testimony".

"I'm going to discount my own testimony," said Jasmine, with a grim determination "it's only going to be a small amount".

"Jaz!"

"Kels, lay off," said Zed.

"I um," interrupted Kat, on a sudden impulse to leave, "would someone point me to the restroom?"

Kat wasn't in the bathroom for more than a minute when Kelsey showed up.

Kat wanted to hide. She didn't know how long she could help herself from blurting out what happened. But it was definitely for the best that Kelsey didn't find out now.

Kels didn't miss a beat.

"Any clue what's up with Jasmine?"

"I, um"

"It's probably something with her and Zed," interrupting Kat. "Something is always up with him", she added with frustration.

They heard Jasmine clear her throat. She poked her head in the bathroom:

"They are calling us, right now".

So the three of them took their unfinished business and followed the plain clothed man into the central dome.

Kat wondered by what process these 7 judges now sat in front of her. She wished she had asked Kelsey, especially since she knew that becoming a

councilor was an aspiration of hers

The main chair looked to be a woman in her late 60s. She looked calm, and dignified, beautiful with her silver curls falling all around her. Kat felt admiration for the way her soft gaze took in all around her, she, too, wanted to be this way one day. She gazed at the other councilors, who looked back with understanding.

They were in a courtroom as large as an auditorium, with easily a thousand seats. All of them were empty except the small group that had come here together.

“Where is everyone?” Kelsey asked as soon as she walked in.

“This matter has been moved to a private council meeting,” replied their courthouse representative.

“That’s strange,” she heard Kelsey say to Peter, before she was ushered to a chair in the middle of the room. Kat noticed there was a piece of chewing gum, stuck on the side of the chair.

Kat alternated between looking up at the seven judges, and looking back at Jasmine, who sat next to Zed with her gaze locked at the floor. Her dark curls flowed all around her, like protective snakes.

Kelsey was looking around at the empty courtroom, frowning, shaking her head.

Then she addressed the councilors.

“Evening of the abundant stars” she began— because by no doubt, it was that hour—

“We’re grateful to the council for their time and patience to address this matter.”

The main chair spoke,

From her voice, Kat recognized it was Skye from the dress shop.

“Thank you, Kelsey Nethene. The proceedings will begin. Due to the sensitive nature of this matter, we will proceed with a private hearing”

“ Would council share with generosity the factors that lead to that decision?”

“We will find an abundance of time to do so after the trial, I assure you,”

Kelsey looked confused for a moment. “Understood, counselor,” she replied.

“You would like to move to naturalize Katherine Charlese, who you say is a citizen of Krall, into Milalese culture. Do you wish to begin?”

“Yes.”

Kelsey turned to Peter, who nodded. She took a deep breath, then beamed at council, and began to speak with confidence—

"Council, we would like to make an appeal to integrate Katherine Charlese into the populace of Mililac. Katherine is a refugee that I came across by sheer luck. In the past ten days, we have been educating Katherine on Milalese culture, and she's been an eager and effective student. She worked with us on Dididak, and has been processing information about our values, our patterns and our collaboration systems."

Katherine smiled at the men and women on council, she was clearly enjoying this moment.

"Katherine understands and emulates our concepts of generating abundance from within, and is quickly integrating all of the details of our society. She's shown promise in the fields of engineering, ingenuity and design"

That was a stretch— Kat wasn't sure when she had shown these things.

"In the ten days she has been here, she's only reacted to our culture with curiosity and reverence. I am excited to see the things she can design, the people she can aid and the beauty she can envision."

Kelsey looked at Kat in the eyes for a moment,

"Furthermore, she's become a beloved friend to many, including my husband and our closest community"

"Thank you, Kelsey. Are there more opening remarks? Jasmine Valair?"

Jasmine stood, slowly.

"I find it challenging to find my own words within in myself today. Instead, I'd like to use my voice to echo Kelsey's sentiments, may this make her truth exponentially more power".

"Are you admitting anxiety, Ms. Valair?"

"Yes, Council"

"You realize you are willingly discounting your testimony to a .8 weight?"

"I understand," Jaz nodded, sadly.

"Very well. If we had detected it, we could have weighed your testimony at .3 to .5. A good choice you made. May you arrive with your own abundance for future sessions"

"Thank you, Council", she said softly. She sat down.

"Peter Nethene"

“Thank you, council. What we have before us is a one of a kind situation. Never before have we encountered a refugee amongst us. This is an important opportunity to apply our values to welcome, accept and integrate. In my experience, it has been a pleasure to welcome Kat into our world, her appreciation of our community often exceeds our own. It’s an inspiration. I’m happy to attest to the character of Katherine Charlese, and look forward to the continuation of her integration process”.

“Thank you, Peter”.

“Zed Vineese?”

“Thank you, council. I’m afraid I only learned about the situation a few moments before we walked into the courthouse.”

Kat frowned, that wasn’t true — why would he say that? Was someone going to correct him?

“I’m just here to offer emotional support to my dear friends,” he continued.

“Thank you for your generosity and exemplification of our values”.

examination

Kat stared up at the bald head of the council’s examiner.

She heard a whirl and a little beeping sound to her right.

“Heart rate 88bpm,” reported a mechanical voice, “tracking eye movement and skin conductivity”

Kat startled . “Heart rate 105bpm,” replied the machine.

The man with a bald head observed her with confusion, “it’s just a biometrics measurement. It reports the metrics of anyone sitting in this chair. It’s for internal state, and veracity”.

Kat nodded, and stole a terrified glance at Kelsey. She smiled very not reassuringly.

“I’m going to be asking you some questions. Please answer them as thoroughly as possible, omitting no relevant information. I’ll give you one warning — obscuring information is a poor choice.”

Kat nodded. “Heart rate 110bpm. Detecting spike in SCR”

How was anyone supposed to stay calm under these circumstances?

She looked out at the huge, empty courtroom, at Jasmine, Zed and Peter, and at the council that sat up around them.

“Kelsey Nathene, you’re permitted to stand by as counsel,” said the bald man. Kelsey stood, and came closer to Kat.

“Just as the honorable Nathaniel Merent explained,” she assured her, “this is just more information that we have about your internal state. Just focus on your breath”.

Kat efforted to slow down her breathing.

“Katherine Charlese,” continued Nathaniel, “let’s begin with who you are, and where you’re from”.

“I’m Katherine, and I’m from Krall, level 3.6.1”.

“What are these levels?”

“Social class in Mililac”.

There were murmurs from the council.

“Interesting. Can you describe your life in Krall?”

“I just finished high school. I live with my parents”.

“Siblings?”

“I’m an only child,” she said. “I mean, I had a sister once, but she died when I was very young”.

More murmurs.

“Heart rate 96bpm”, reported the machine next to her.

This sucked. She tried to look at Jasmine, but she couldn’t catch her eye.

“How did you enter Mililac?”

Kat straightened her spine. This was her moment, “Krall has a lot of security that they say keeps monsters out, but truly it’s designed to keep people in. I had some information that security was weak in one area.”

“How did you come by that information?” asked her examiner.

This. This was what she had been worried about. What she had played over and over in her mind. She took a deep breath,

“I was lucky to come across it,” she said, vaguely, “I was in a state of receiving abundance”.

That..... didn't go well. *Fuck*, thought Kat. Kelsey had encouraged her to use Milalese language to connect with the council, but she could tell instantly, from everyone's facial expressions, that she had said the wrong thing.

"We appreciate your mindset," said Nathaniel, in a tone that implied the opposite, "but we need to know exactly how you came across that security information".

Kat nodded.

"Now would be a good time to share that," pressed on Nathaniel.

She gulped, a wave of nausea passing over her. The last thing she wanted was to talk about Travis in front of all these people.

"I met someone....at the palace. I shouldn't have met them, but I did".

"What were the circumstances of you meeting them?"

"It was a...personal relationship," gasped Kat.

"And he gave you this information," said Nathaniel. Kat suddenly realized how this looked.

"Yes, but not like, directly— like, he didn't tell me to do it. I inferred it,"

"What other aid did he provide in your escape?"

"He gave me a gift. That I pawned for the money to buy some supplies. Some food, and I cut the electric fence when no one was looking".

She stole a look at Kelsey. She looked concerned.

"What was this informant's name?" asked Nathaniel.

“Travis,” said Kat, blushing. “Or at at least, I think,” she added lamely.

“What other information did this person share?”

This wasn’t going well.

“He shared with me that he didn’t like the actions the palace took at times, and he was wondering if other places existed.”

“Did it ever occur to you that he may be sharing this information with you intentionally?”

“No,” said Kat, sadly.

“What did you bring with you on the journey?”

“A backpack with a sweater, some small amount of food, and I left the pliers”.

“Did Travis give you the backpack?”

“No!” exclaimed Kat, terrified of where this was going, “No, I bought it at a random store, there was no way he could have known which store I would go to”.

“Kelsey,” asked Nathaniel, “did you ever check the contents of Kat’s backpack?”

“No,” Kelsey replied softly. “When she arrived, she had unripe papayas in her backpack. That’s how Jasmine and I began to suspect.”

“You couldn’t identify from her clothing?”

“Well, she was covered in glitter”. Kat heard one of the council members suppress a giggle.

“Did you know anything about Mililac before you arrived?” continued Nathaniel.

“No,” said Kat sternly.

“Do you have any recording device on you?”

“No,” said Kat.

“Spike in SCR detected. Heart rate 115bpm” beeped the machine next to her.
Goddammit! She wasn't lying.

“I don't have any recording device,” shouted Kat, “I'm not working for Krall. I wasn't sent here by anyone. I ran away on my own accord!”

Nathaniel looked mildly alarmed. He switched gears, “Over the last ten days, would you describe your actions?”

“I've been learning,” replied Kat, grateful for the change of pace “from Kelsey and Jasmine. They have been showing me Milalese culture, and I've been sharing with them about Krall.”

“Please describe the places you have been”.

Maybe this was getting better.

“I've been to four temples in Ashe, to core temple, to the Verdant mountains and Verdant min. I've been to Lexarvia, to the rose garden, several restaurants, Abierto, in Logos, to the art sculpture that's not the official entrance to Logos, and to the River of Repressed Grief”.

“That's quite the tour,” replied Nathaniel.

The room was completely quiet. Kat's head swam; Kelsey hadn't anticipated this.

“Did you take any action outside of Jasmine and Kelsey’s awareness?”

Oh no. Zed’s ride. Maybe there were really other people in the mountains there; she couldn’t rat them out.

“No” she said. “Heart rate 126bpm, spike detected” beeped her worst nightmare.

“No?” pried Nathaniel.

“No,” insisted Kat, “I’ve just been following around my friends, I haven’t done anything outside of that”.

That was true.

“How did you use resources in Mililac?”

“Jasmine and Kelsey shared with me. They fed me. They paid for anything we needed. Jasmine dressed me up,” she added, desperately trying to distract the conversation.

“Did you take any resources outside of that?”

“No,” said Kat. “Heart rate 134bpm. SRV spike detected,” interjected the machine.

“Katherine Charlese, I’m going to ask this one more time. Did you take anything outside of Jasmine and Kelsey’s awareness?”

Kat felt sick. There was no way to evade this.

“SRV spike detected—” began the machine.

“I took a flare,” she interrupted, “One of Carter’s flares. I didn’t ask about it”.

Kat snuck a glance at Kelsey. Her expression flashed hurt for a moment, but she recovered to neutral quickly.

“Why did you take the flare, Katherine?” asked Nathaniel.

Kat closed her eyes. She was screwed,

“It was just an impulse. I shouldn’t have done it. I just thought maybe I could tell my mom and dad that I was safe”.

Nathaniel’s eyes widened in alarm, and she felt a wave of pass through the council.

“That concludes our examination, Katherine”.

the verdict

Kat felt dizzy. She burned with so many eyes on her. She became oddly aware of the gum on her chair, although no one else could see it. It was such a blemish in an otherwise perfect world.

"Council will now take a moment to deliberate in a separate room," announced Skye, "May compassion and discernment guide our journey".

Kat's heart pounded in her chest and shamed burned down her neck. As the councils walked out, Kat whirled to face her friends.

Kelsey looked concerned. Zed's face was completely expressionless, and Jasmine still looked at the floor.

Emotional support, my ass — what was his deal?

At least Peter and Kelsey held hands. Peter looked up at Kat compassionately. She felt tears well up in her eyes, and she instinctively pulled her knees into her chest before realizing how inappropriate that was.

The councilors weren't gone for more than three minutes. When they came back, their gazes were as blank as Zed's. Sky stepped up to the central podium.

"Thank you Kelsey, Peter and Jasmine, for bringing this before this council. We recognize your generosity, your kindness and your exemplification of Milalese values. We understand your compassionate impulse, and we also hope this examination has highlighted the dangers and risks of your decision.

This is a difficult situation for all of us, and council has reached a decision. This was not a choice made lightly.

Unfortunately, upon the wisdom of our collective experience, we have to vote no on this matter"

Vote no , thought Kat, oh no no no

" Katherine's background from Krall is a serious liability . Council hears that the proponents of this motion claim asylum and have observed assimilation. There is a distinct possibility, within and even outside of Katherine's own awareness, that she was sent as a form of espionage and subterfuge. This presents distinct security risks to all of Mililac's citizens. We will review all of Katherine's possessions, and build a working map of where she has visited.

Furthermore, it is important to consider that she has grown up her whole life in a culture of scarcity and suffering.

This has crystalized a different set of beliefs, a different relationship to society. The core trust we have for one another, that has been built for generations, has experienced a similar process of erosion in Krall. Even if her intentions were pure, there's a likely outcome of harm.

We are sorry to share the verdict that Katherine is a threat who could corrupt our society. In moments of conflict, we may find that her first instinct is to grab anything she can—"

Kat's neck burned with shame, and anger.

"And statistically she has a lower threshold for violence. In this moment, we choose to honor our founder's vision. We cannot afford for her behavior or her beliefs to take root here".

The main counselor took a breath, and looked genuinely sad.

"We regret the disappointment this decision will cause. We cannot exile her with the information she has, and since Katherine is under eighteen, her options are limited. We have chosen for Katherine Charlese preventative confinement, indefinitely. As of this moment, we consider her in our custody".

Kat whirled around to look at her friends behind her. Jasmine's eyes wide with shock, she looked at Kat with dismay. Kelsey looked livid and Peter was frowning. Zed shook his head slightly.

A hand was on her arm, and several people she didn't know had come up to her.

"I'm going to ask you to come with me," said a tempered voice. When she pulled her arm back, she felt a prick in the other shoulder.

imprisonment

Kat awoke in a dark, simple room.

At first she was groggy, confused as she took in the unfamiliar surroundings. Everything was dark— or was it blue?

There was a window. The window looked on into a simple expanse of sky. The window shone light into the room, which was small, simple and yet larger than the bedrooms she knew at home.

The walls were a dark beige, her bed was a simple wood frame, painted blue, and the sheets were dark. There was even a plant by a simple wooden desk.

Simplicity , thought Kat. Then horror seized her. She'd been locked in here. This was prison .

I cannot believe I get a freaking window in prison , she thought. She took a deep breath,

and punched it.

"OW FUCK". The window glitched.

Of course. They weren't such idiots to put up a glass window here.

She ran to the door and tried to twist the doorknob, but her hand went right through it. She banged on the wall. Over, and over and over—

The room flashed, and the window went away. In a stark moment, she was standing in a white room with no doors, and no windows. She stared, shocked, at the hideously blank walls all around her. A toilet sat in the corner.

An alarm of some kind rang outside. A buzzing sound appeared to hear left, and then a door materialized out of the wall itself.

"Morning of the sun" said a thin, female voice, through it.

"And to a beautiful noon," she replied, instinctively, then frowned.

Her door opened. A woman wearing a plain white linen suit stepped inside. She was carrying a clipboard. And a holster.

"Pleasure to meet you, Katherine Charlese." she said a bit nervously.

"Pleasure to meet you, too," replied Kat, with confusion and suspicion.

"My name is Tania," she stammered, "I am assigned to be your liason for your time in confinement. This is not a relationship between equals, I am carrying 6 different types of force of various degrees"

She paused.

"Great," said Kat.

"I'm here to remind you that you've been sentenced to life in confinement, without social visits or access to technology. I'll be your sole contact."

Tania took a deep breath, like this conversation was causing her severe discomfort.

"your meals will be served automatically, and you can request books from the library, but not which ones. The books will be burned... after....after um, they've

been corrupted with your use".

Tania was not particularly good at this. She frowned, "At this time, we do not have a secure exercise system to offer you, but we could consider installing a machine to assist you"

"Very thoughtful," mumbled Kat.

"If at any point this process of solitary confinement becomes excessively stressful, you can request euthanasia, which is quick and painless. Euthanasia will not be administered without your consent"

"Go fuck yourself"

Tania flinched. "This anti-social behavior will be recorded in the file. This seems like a good time for this conversation to be complete. If you continue to bang on the walls, you will damage the aesthetic design that is for *your* benefit".

Tania left, and closed the door behind her, and the door disappeared. The window and plain, simple room design came back. Kat fumed. So this was their plan?

"It was against their culture" to kill her themselves, but somehow 100% great if they locked her up until she begged for it.

Kat suddenly felt homesick; at least the cruelties back home were honest.

A pit began to form in the bottom of her stomach, like a black hole swallowing up all hope. She remembered how her mother curled up on the couch for weeks after losing her sister, while Kat's grandfather somehow found the strength to cook, to clean, for her. Remembered how her grandfather had become sick himself, just a few years later.

Now she was just one more person her mother had lost, like a whole swell of grief, the entire river pouring through her.

There was no more hope for her, thought Kat, this is all there will be. How many years of pain could she hold? She was now fed, watered, safe and had an entire library. Of random books. They would install an exercise bike. Maybe it could be a cool, acrylic one like Lane's. No, somehow an exercise bike made it worse.

Maybe they would let her decorate her cell; after all, that would be in alignment with their values, wouldn't it?

Maybe she could learn about art from the books in the library, and then decorate her cell with what she learned.

Thinking about it, Kat almost became excited, like she could give her life to this small, tiny expression.

If only I didn't feel the grief, thought Kat, and the loneliness. Otherwise it's not a terrible sentence at all. Maybe they would give her something to make the pain go away.

Kat began to knock on the door a whole bunch of times.

"Hello?" "Hello?"

The window disappeared, baring the white walls around her.

Frustrated, she sank down by the door. The darkness returned like a cloud all around her. It serves her right, really, to end up here— where did she think she was going? Even if she had been accepted in Mililac, she knew they would never have let her see her family again.

And she had been willing to make such a sacrifice.

But surely, in time, it would have killed her, eventually. From within, knowing that she had left everyone behind. She would never belong. Not truly. What kind of a traitor would belong anywhere?

She began to wonder how everyone was at home. And a few hours later, she still couldn't stop crying.

That night the wall opened to deliver a meal, and a sleeping pill. Kat took it.

"Can I have some painkillers?" Kat yelled into the void, wondering if she was being monitored.

On the next meal, there was a tincture labelled 'natural ease' and some painkillers she'd seen in Jasmine's cabinet. She took the natural ease, which didn't really help, but held off on the painkillers. Anna's voice rang in the background, "you don't need it, darling".

Easy for her to say, though Kat, her life was great.

There was a nagging thought that Kat had been repressing as best as she could; but suddenly it sobered upon her that if she was imprisoned for life, she would never be held. Her last kiss had really been her last.

For two days she held off from taking the chemical painkillers.

On the third day she cracked.

They were strong, and the first time she fell asleep it felt like a lifetime. She had gentle dreams of dancing with Travis underneath the circulating stained glass of Jasmine's favorite dance hall, and when she woke up, it was bitter to realize it wasn't real. She closed her eyes and hugged her pillow, trying to fall back into it, over and over and over again. This wasn't enough, she thought, she would have to take more.

Maybe she should do it, she thought, reflecting on the euthanasia, maybe in one month?

At that moment, there was a weird noise in the walls.

breakout

"Welcoming abundance" sounded a deep male voice. The doorway appeared once more, and a light shone into the room. Brendon walked through with Logan.

"I think we should move quickly, Kat" Brendon said, right away. He'd flipped some light switch that Kat couldn't see. She blinked, wondering if this was another dream.

"What?"

"We need to move, now"

Kat frowned at them, "huh?"

Logan pinched her.

"Ow"

"Kat, I'm not joking, we need to get out"

Kat got herself up.

"Just follow me," said Brendon. They stepped outside the door that had somehow materialized, and as soon as they walked through, Brendon waved something over Kat's face.

Kat watched in shock as a version of her appeared to be laying in bed.

"It's not very stable," Brendon shook his head, "it's not going to last a half a day, and it's obvious up close...I had to steal some old stuff. Let's keep moving".

The door disappeared and they were walking down the hallway of a plain, but all things considered, not inherently creepy building.

"How did you do that? How'd you open the door" asked Kat.

"Kat, I've worked on half this infrastructure"

Logan rolled his eyes. "Well, also," he confided under his breath, into Kat's ear "he's hooked up with Tania. She practically gave him the codes" .

It was pitch black when they stepped outside, and Kat was still coming off the sleep meds. She couldn't tell much, so she just followed Brendon's footsteps as Logan held her hand.

"Down here"

"Where are we going?" asked Kat as she tensed up, forgetting that beggars couldn't be choosers.

"We don't want to walk where anyone can see us. We're going to take a little robo ride. Look down".

A box opened up in the street, roughly the size and shape of an XXL coffin. Kat hated this.

"Kat lets go," said Brendon.

She looked up at Logan in panic. "We'll all fit," he smiled, "It's just a little cuddle ride"

Kat laughed nervously.

"Okay," she said, taking a deep breath. The three of them crowded into the bunker, Kat squeezing Logan's hands as the container closed, and the box began to move. It was a little musty.

"We're not going far," whispered Brendon, "we won't run out of air".

"Comforting" retorted Kat. They all laughed.

"Thank you," she said, when the laughter died out. For all she knew, they were taking her to get boiled, but thank you seemed like the definitive response.

"That's all you got?" teased Logan, "Just a thank you? I could go for a plaque. We're used to a nice plaque around here for stuff like this"

"Thank us when you're somewhere safe," said Brendon, still serious, keeping his voice low.

Kat nodded. They rode in silence, huddled together. It was an odd time to ask this question but she turned her head to Brendon and whispered

"I'm surprised you— "

"— got you out? Yeah." He bit his lip.

Kat waited.

"Honestly," said Brendon, "look.... being real with you. I agree with council. I think you're dangerous— well, maybe not, like, *you* , specifically, but definitely

people like you. Maybe you. I don't know. If more of you come over, it's not going to go well."

Kat frowned, "So why'd you help me?"

Brendon shook his head, then paused, sighing, "Don't tell Kelsey I never do anything for her".

"Want me to put my arm around you, Kat?" asked Logan, "would really be more comfortable for me that way". Kat nodded.

The container opened. They breathed a sigh of relief.

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Brendon stepped out first and held out his hand to Kat, "I'm serious, Kat. This is the last time. Logan is going to take you somewhere safe. Don't leave there."

Removed chapters:

abundance lecture

After a hurried breakfast and many promises to connect at the dance later, Kelsey and Jaz rushed off a slightly confused Zed, so they could begin their planned lectures.

"It's been fun," admitted Kels sheepishly, "to get to kind of plan this trip for you, you know? It makes me wonder if my next career should be in education. Jaz and I were up late chatting about it." She smiled "So today— no temple. Lecture instead. Ready, Jaz?"

Jasmine nodded, and stretched out on the shag carpet before her.

"Abundance is an attitude, not a state of being— but it creates a state of being."

"It's one of those things that's tricky to get your mind around, but with enough reference points you can start to feel it," interrupted Kelsey. "Sorry." she added, turning her attention back to Jasmine.

"It's "enoughness", continued Jasmine, twisting into a more comfortable position on the carpet "and it starts with "am I enough? then, are you enough, and, are we enough together?"

Jasmine's movements accented her words in a way that seemed almost unconsciously performative.

"Can I ask questions when things don't make sense?" said Kat.

"Certainly", they both chimed in unison.

"Okay, what has Mililac done when there's been a famine, or drought? When there hasn't been enough food?"

"There has always been enough food, Kat" said Jasmine, incredulously, dropping her pre-planned speech.

"But what if there wasn't?"

"Famine does not exist in nature . It is a man made phenomenon. It comes from the mindset of scarcity," Kelsey named.

"So what you're saying is that Mililac has never truly faced a real challenge?"

"We face challenges every day!"

"Real challenges! Not, 'what color should we paint the walls'?"

"Kat," sighed Jasmine, "First off, that was a little rude. Also, may I remind you that *you* were the one who asked us to integrate into the culture here."

"Jaz," Kelsey stopped her, "what do you mean by a real challenge, Kat?"

"I mean, what do you do when there isn't actually enough of something? Like something important?"

"Then we'll work together, Kat, to make more of whatever is needed. For example, we used to need indium to make touch screen works, but then scientists developed—"

"No, I mean, like, something like a famine?"

"No, I've never faced a famine" admitted Kelsey, "have you?"

"No," added Kat, "not really when I think about it. I mean, not a real one. Sometimes there's a shortage of something, but I don't usually know why."

"Why don't you know why?"

"Well, actually about the famine thing—" said Jasmine, "that's a common literature and movie theme, what we'd do if that were to happen. I really liked *Gardeners of the Dust*, that was a dystopian film that came out recently—"

"And in it," continued Kat, "did one group take all the resources?"

“What? No, it’s the brave story of how they worked together to create an irrigation system from moonwater”

“It’s not very realistic to assume one group would take all the resources,” frowned Kelsey, “that would just obviously lead to a greater problem”.

“But it happens”

“Why would you want to take all the resources, when that would just lead to a fight, and there’s more than enough resources for everyone”

Honestly Kat didn’t know. “They say it’s human nature”.

Our societal foundation is abundance. We cultivate it our whole lives; our entire education system is founded on it."

"Creativity, ingenuity, openness, fortitude" recited Kelsey. "That's what you do when you feel not enoughness".

"Different leanings think of it in their own frames," added Jasmine, "but within the seed & the root and abstract, it's all the same. We mirror, reflect this back a hundred ways."

"Say there isn't the right quantity of some resource," continued Kelsey, "something you need for a project. But maybe you can repurpose another resource, or change the direction of the project, or involve other minds if you cannot see it"

"So it's just semantics? There's not enough of something but you never say there isn't enough?"

"Ugh, no, Kat, it's so much deeper than that", said Jasmine, putting her head in her hands again.

"Can we all take a 10 minute break?" said Kelsey, exasperated, "I'll admit I'm having a moment of scarcity"

"Sorry," nudged Kat.

"Yes, a break is a good idea," echoed Jaz. "Kat, this is going to be like temple, but like, here and now."

Jasmine walked over, and opened a cabinet filled with spiral candles. Placing one on a tray, she flicked a light to set it off.

"It will last 10 minutes. Let's observe the flame and allow it to move us," she said, a little wearily.

Kelsey, Jasmine and Kat then sat around the candle and did nothing but breathe for 10 minutes. Kat thought the whole process was incredibly awkward, and eventually lost herself watching the wax of the candle drip down. A whole candle burning in ten minutes was actually pretty impressive. What was it made of?

A chime moved throughout Jasmine's living room.

"Okay, plan B," said Kelsey, snapping back into action as if she, too, had just been waiting for the chime to go off "Less lectures, I think. We should just assume everything is strange and unfamiliar, and it's okay if it doesn't make sense."

Jasmine nodded, "More showing, less talking."

Notes on Kat getting in

"I mean," Jasmine shot a look around to see if anyone was listening, "Kelsey and I have been wondering how you got in. We want to talk to our friend who works in defense. But it feels dangerous; I think it's best to wait till the trial date. I know there's powerhouses to prevent foreign machinery, armies, all sorts of things but they probably permit the free crossing of animals, and that's how you were....essentially small enough to slip through. Once they find out, they will definitely increase precautions."