

**THE PRICE OF A
BEATING HEART**

BOOK ONE OF THE PRICE OF A HEART SERIES

DEON ASHLEIGH

ONE

THE BELL DINGS and I become a murderer.

I hold the knife with my thumb and middle finger and cut the wight into small cubes. Place each piece—marinated in thrice-boiled synthHoney and pureed tomatoes—gently in my mouth and chew silently. Slowly. Counting each movement of my jaw.

Twenty-five—that is the correct number of chews for each piece.

The magnificent blend of sweet and sour massages my senses. This is the best wight I have ever tasted. The best place I have ever been. I always want to dine in such comfort. Sit

across from my husband, James of the Pillars. Be embraced by a floor-length dress with many shades of blue, a short train, and glittering gold words. Enjoy the light blue cuffs with black dots at my wrists, matte white pearls around my neck, V3454 Scarlet on my lips. And on my feet, glossy, black, one-inch heels.

My seat is luxurious. High-backed and made of real oak and leather. And the air? It smells of fresh, spicy lavender and sweet cream.

After five years of planning, we are here: Ancient Dreams.

The finest restaurant in Urban. I cannot believe it. Oh, I cannot believe I am actually here, in all this beauty.

I match myself to the quiet energy of them. To the red glow all around me. To the Anomalies. They are everywhere, sat at circular tables, and it is grander than I could have ever hoped for.

A spherical chandelier made of twigs hovers over each table; tiny crystals create a soft glow from their branches' centers. The sphere rotates above us, its lights bouncing off the cream-colored walls and gold trim.

Red slats cross the towering ceilings and are matched by lattices that follow the curve of the arched doorways. They are stunning. Thick tufts of dyed-black shrubs peppered with slender, gold-painted leopard orchids grow along their openings.

It is a near-perfect replica of our world 470 years ago. Different only because there is no green anywhere.

"Delicious." I massage my fork's smooth metal once more and set it on my left.

James of the Pillars glances around. Four black dots trail down each of his temples. He is thin and wearing a matching blue suit with a train that grazes the ground. Unlike my dress, it glows a faint red.

He eats little and drinks much. Tiny waves of his nerves ripple in my cup as his leg bounces under the table. Rustles the gold stripe on our black tablecloth.

I reach for his hand. Slowly slide my thumb between his index and ring fingers. The healed-over skin of his missing middle finger is soft and smooth.

“Relax, my husband.” He sighs and smiles at me.

Here, our life is perfect. Here.

Three hundred eighty years ago, The Dome was built. But one headquarters wasn't enough tuh govern our Earth and keep yuh wild humans in line, so we erected anotha. Virtual visits available daily. Yuh favored show, Today in the Past!

Much of the other patrons' talk is of James of the Pillars. Some loathe him, but most are excited to see him after these eight years. Next to a few is a black tray holding red bottles painted with drizzling gold accents—symbols of their immense status.

They glance at him, but none will be so impolite to approach him while dining. Our table at the front of the room will only highlight their impoliteness.

A soft blue light comes from the floor-to-ceiling windows to my right. The clouds drift sleepily as the sky fades under the setting sun, still touching the Grand Anomalies' glowing, magnificent statues. They are made from red marble and positioned next to each other over softly lapping water.

Each statue's arm reaches to the next. They touch their fingertips together, holding a tiny piece of our world between their palms.

One day, after he has been old and gray, a statue will be erected for my husband. It will be beautiful like him, but I hope to never see it.

“More Manoir de Sang?” He drinks the last drop of the blood wine before raising my hand to his lips and kissing the tips of my fingers. A spot of red remains on the middle one.

“Of course, but I'll pay. Husband, I urge yuh tuh not drink dis bottle as if yuh been choking and it's air.” Three empty bottles, different shapes decorated with ornate windows, sit on a black tray next to us. “Hoarding. It's a word.” I suck the sweet red from my finger loudly.

He laughs. “Hoarding? Me? My love, you have withheld your units all night. My ledger is near negative, yet you scold me when you *finally* decide to pay.”

“Don't tell me 'finally.' I've tolerated yuh excessive thirst our entire dinner.”

“True. I love this wine more than you.”

I laugh and motion to the bottles. “Clearly.”

He snaps his fingers and signals a happy-maker, who pours other patrons' beverages even quicker and rushes to our table.

To wait.

Ding. 60,000 units.

Like the others darting to and fro, the man wears a tailored gold suit jacket and cream-colored pants and shoes. Thick makeup covers his face, and red permapaint coats his fingertips.

He does not write anything down; a happy-maker's memory is their greatest pride.

The man stands still. His eyes never leave James of the Pillars's back as he searches for something he dropped. I tap my foot. Rub small circles in our tablecloth's fabric. Soft like infant skin.

Tap, tap, tap...

Tap, tap, tap...

The wall moves. My tapping stops.

A woman, draped in cream-colored clothing and gold shoes, steps forward. Her smile widens as she walks to one of the tables and blows out seventeen candles on a boy's birthday cake.

The woman is not looking at the cake. She is staring at the glass next to it, her eyes glued to the water's condensation sliding down it.

“My candles're out, Keeper. Get away from me.”

She blinks and nods. Goes back to the wall. The room is painted in those like her. They stand next to one another. Arms at their sides, palms out.

Silent. Attentive. Smiling. Waiting.

Ding. 90,000 units. All like her are near the same worth.

Tap, tap, tap...

A minute later, my husband pops up from under the table, holding a small gold doorknob. It is a key part of the beautiful mansion the four wine bottles will become after he assembles them.

He pockets the tiny ball and looks from me to the waiting man, who is grinning harder than I thought possible.

“Take her order.”

The happy-maker turns to me.

“I want duh final bottle of Manoir de Sang. Non-alcoholic.”

I slur the words together and smile because of it.

Arch an eyebrow at James of the Pillars. He said the final bottle is the best flavor. I do not know how the other three can be improved upon, but I will be the judge of that.

“That’ll be five thousand units, marm.” I put my left arm out, palm up, and the man places The Charge to my elbow.

The vial-like device beeps. A beam of green light shoots from it and makes a small green dot on the ceiling. Twelve feet high, it does not feel like a gentle grin doting on me anymore but a hard, judgmental sneer stabbing into me. Tiny compared to it.

Worthless.

Some of the patrons giggle. There should be no light. No beep. No green. The happy-maker’s smile falls.

So does mine.

He assumed I would not have enough for the wine before reading my ledger. Programmed The Charge to react too quickly. I thought this practice had gone out of favor long ago.

I hold my arm straighter, my chin tighter. No one will see it tremble. I stare into his eyes.

You are Common like me. How could you do this?

He drops his gaze to the small machine and presses the button. The Charge reads my barcode, branded into my skin, and a small pinch tells me when the large needle pierces through. Six seconds later, my blood fills the container to the fifth line, and The Charge squirts a clear liquid on my skin.

Lights red to indicate success. He pulls it away. The invisiband's wetness dries quickly and stops my blood from running.

The man hurries to get our final bottle.

"My love—" James of the Pillars reaches out to me, but I pull my hand away to stop what he will say next. His words will not bring the wight's sweetness or the eve's lightness back. It is sour now. Heavy. It was supposed to be *perfect*.

Stupid man.

I wait. Again. Irritated. Both by the growing pain under my belly and the spreading sickness bubbling within it. I know it well. A suffocating wave overtaking my thoughts.

I stare at the soft inner skin of my elbow.

I am as valuable as any other person. I am worthy.

I am worthy?

I study my clothing. The Anomalies'. I matched myself to them perfectly. Spent hours checking, adjusting, twisting, breaking, checking again. I made sure none of me was left.

How did the happy-maker know I did not belong? What did I do wrong to make him use The Green Charge? I peek at James of the Pillars. His face is scrunched up. Sour. Angry. Sad.

We are thinking the same thought, he and I: Will anyone else be suspected of inferiority? Illegality. Inability to pay.

Our moods worsen as we scan the room, watching other patrons.

Dings. Many billions of units. Again, the zeroes clog in my mind. How are these numbers truly possible?

A woman a few tables over purchases imported First Africa Northlake wight—and is not subjected to The Green Charge.

Neither is the couple behind James of the Pillars, who purchase real, organic lettuce for their salad. And the man to my right with a large slab of uncontaminated cow? Nothing. It is only we who are forced into humiliation.

James of the Pillars huffs. “I will get a refund.”

“It’s not allowed.” I only want to go home.

“Well, I will force it. This is a most heinous discrimination.”

He marches to The Charge counter a few feet from us. The attendant mumbles “manager, manager” in a device. Glances around the room. Steels himself for the onslaught.

Ding. 520,000 units.

Every happy-maker adds The Charge counter to their circuit. They bow deeply, ask if they can do anything, get him anything. My husband declines each one, and they apologize before rushing to their next table.

When his grievances rise far above the restaurant’s din—only a few whispers now—I grab our jackets, the bottles, my purse, and walk as fast as I can to him. Heavy with pregnancy, my belly is five times its original size, and the band under it rubs against my skin.

I lean close to his ear. “It is not worth it. You waste our savings.” I revert to my birth accent, enunciating my words as the low-class must.

James of the Pillars’s mid-brown neck has gone bright red. At my words, he quiets and looks around, close to tears. All stare. Politely, if that were possible. He looks away from me, whispers, “You deserve more, my love.”

A woman smooths her hair as she strides toward us. Her multicolored suit is as bright as her smile. Neither hide the

slight sheen on her face or that more sweat is gathering on the lone dot at each of her temples.

Ding. Oh my. 3,400,000,000 units.

The happy-maker trails behind her, bent low. A perfect position for the miserable weeping willow he is. When she reaches us, he drops to his knees, forehead touching the floor, palms up.

She does not look at me, only shoves the final bottle into my hands a moment before I bow to her. I strain my eyes upward to watch what is happening.

“James of the Pillars, I’m very, very sorry.” She greets and bows to my husband. His four dots far outrank her one. “I’m the manager, and I take full responsibility fuh this man. What can I do tuh improve yuh experience, sirn?”

She hands him a lifetime dining card. No refund.

He looks at me, holding the expensive, thick-glassed bottles and everything else. Narrows in on my purse swinging from my wrist. Less than. Common.

“You may unbow, my love.” At his words, I unbend.

A muscle spasms in his neck as he gathers the items from me. It twitches harder when the manager looks back and forth from me to him, her thought clear:

Your donkey should be carrying these.

Her look pierces through me. My eyes lower to the pristine black marble as I fill with the urge to grab our belongings from him. Make things right.

A second passes, and I lift my gaze. James of the Pillars squeezes the neck of the final bottle, and the woman steps back.

He is about to explode bigger than a hundred uncorked wines. I cannot let that happen. Am I not embarrassed enough?

I pull at him gently, my hand shaking on his arm as I nod toward the other patrons. The massive room has been silent for a long time.

He takes a few calming breaths. “You can do nothing, marm. You and this man have disrespected my wife. I am immensely dissatisfied.” He hands her the three bottles. “Expect a notice of closure. Enough time to replace you and those you have trained. This establishment is—” He shakes his head.

We leave the dining area after he drops the card to the floor. I stare at it. A lifetime of dining at Ancient Dreams. Left here.

Soon, I lean on him more. Slow more. My back aches, and the pain under my stomach worsens. The manager trails him, apologizing profusely. Only stopping when he tells her to not follow.

I look back when she turns on the happy-maker, loud now. “Why’re yuh still here? Yuh unemployed. Get away from me.”

The happy-maker grabs none of his possessions, as is custom. Tomorrow, he will receive a new life position with far lower pay in a rural shack of a restaurant—rather than in the fanciest establishment in Urban. Also custom.

Good. He deserves it. Wretched man. This night would have been perfect if not for him.

I have waited so long for this night.

How could this have happened?

My thoughts loop this question as we continue down the long, red carpet. Walk past large, gold-rimmed pictures of

Grand Anomalies. I studied each when we arrived, watched their speeches, but now I avoid their eyes. They should not have to see me sniffing and wiping snot from my nose.

“I apologize, habibi.”

He has no reason to apologize. He is why I was able to come here at all. Commons cannot enter Ancient Dreams without an Anomaly.

“It is okay. Relax, my husband.” The building is large, and the exit is far away. He holds my hand, rubbing my fingers with his thumb.

The happy-maker bows to him and speeds past us.

Too fast for me to think of a most unpleasant thing to say. It is there. I can feel it on the tip of my tongue...

Nothing.

After a few minutes, I stop to catch my breath. The band under my belly has tightened, and the arch of my foot throbs. Neither hurts enough to dull the misery inside me. Hide the truth.

I am not worthy; I cannot even pretend to be.

Antoine of the Glades walks up to us with a large, ripe tomato in one hand and a greasy piece of fried wight in the other. His lips are oily, and a tomato seed sits in his neatly trimmed mustache.

Ding. Zeroes bunch in my mind. It stutters, trying to fathom them. Calculates. 21,200,000,000 units. What. Wow. I am still unused to Anomalies' numbers.

I stare at him. He has added gold flecks to his light gray eyes. Many in Urban add small changes; you cannot even see

the alterations with subtler mods. His change should make his concerts even more popular.

I have listened to all of his compositions, and I want to pepper him with questions, but now is not the right time. I hold myself still.

Antoine of the Glades stands in front of my husband. He is older but looks younger. Taller. A line of five black dots is on each side of his temples.

James of the Pillars bows deeply to him; I bow as far as I can. He straightens. I do not.

Tap, tap, tap...

It echoes in my head.

“You may unbow,” the other man says. I hold in a groan as I unbend.

“We are going home.” My husband sidesteps him, but I motion for us to stay.

It has been many months since he casually spoke with another Anomaly, and he would welcome the conversation. This night cannot get any worse, so why not spend a few minutes more?

There is so much beauty here, and I have waited all my years to enjoy it.

James of the Pillars points to the dining area. “Are you sure?”

“Yes, I need to rest anyway.”

He and I move to the benches lining the hallway’s walls. I lean back and rub my fingers on the cushion’s down. Magnificently soft.

“Speak freely, my love.” My husband permits me to join their discussion.

As Antoine of the Glades comes to the bench, he puts the tomato in the crook of his elbow. Wipes his hand on his pants. Like the other Anomalies, his barcodes glow red. Bright against the tomato's smooth skin.

They stand in front of me. Hold their fingers together and touch their palms in greeting. The man hums a tune I have never heard in his deep, resonant, perfect pitch. It is more stunning in person.

The layered notes soothe the turmoil inside me. Fade away as if I had not heard them at all. My husband's shoulders lower as he closes his eyes. Our belongings fall to the floor. His throat works a moment, eager to reply with a more exquisite sound—but instead, he presses his lips together and opens his eyes. One by one, he picks up our belongings. Drops a few once more.

Antoine of the Glades looks vaguely in my direction before holding his hand up near his body. I scoot forward and reach my palm out, stopping an inch from touching his. I feel better. Most, like him, do not offer me any greeting. To them, I do not exist.

James of the Pillars stands, his arms full again. They talk while I sit back. Though my husband makes every effort to elicit my opinion, I give none. Instead, I meld into the cushions. Smell the fresh paint on the walls—J5900 Cream. This is the third version Urban has made. A lighter lacquer and stronger hints of sweet cream scent waft from the paint.

Soon enough, I cannot hear them. Near-transparent films cover their mouths so they can speak of new ideas and inventions. James of the Pillars makes large gestures, his entire

body animated as he takes up much of the conversational space. When he mouths a word, his films blur his lips. This feature is a requirement for all Anomalies.

Almost as quickly as their private conversation began, the films flatten into their cheeks, and their words fill the air. They talk of old Common laws.

No large gestures. No smiles. No passion-lit eyes. My husband has gone dull once more.

When their discussion finishes, Antoine of the Glades leans forward and taps him on the forehead. Scans him from head to toe. “Yuh speak... differently, and yuh look awful. Ashen. Sickly. Yuh’ve grown thin.”

James of the Pillars pokes the other man’s belly; it jiggles. “And yuh’ve just grown.”

They laugh. My husband speaks quickly in his relaxed, natural, high-class accent.

Antoine of the Glades glances away. “We need yuh. Our world needs yuh—fully.”

“Never. Never, but I very much wish that was possible.”

“It’s possible.” He motions to the dots on my husband’s temples. “I know it must be exhaustin’ livin’ as a lowly four-dot and havin’ tuh travel when called tuh duty.” An empty circle surrounding an upside-down triangle broken into pieces glows on the man’s neck. Fades. “Returnin’ tuh Urban’d be easier, James—”

“I said never.”

Antoine of the Glades sighs as he puts his arm out. “A grand eve tuh yuh.” They press their palms together again. The man shoots me a glare. “Both.”

Another machete slices through my heart. I look down. It is not my fault James of the Pillars left Urban; that was his choice.

I pull him back when he steps toward the man.

“Husband, he is not worth it. Let us go home. I cannot take anymore.” I take his offered hand, stand, and pull my jacket tighter.

We continue to the exit. This night could not have turned more horrid. I cannot sift through my feelings fast enough. They are hardening into an unreadable boulder in the bottom of my stomach, so I stare at the man’s neck as he walks off.

I have seen that triangle many times before.

It is dangerous.

When we reach the outdoors, I look up, once again entranced by the magnificence of Urban. Skyscrapers covered in fluorescent graffiti murals, the freshest of air, lush grass, 200-foot redwood trees, small, living animals scurrying around, hundreds of bikes and bike racks. HoverCars. Invisible and silent, the sky looks clear as citizens move here and there, traveling through the dark blues and fading oranges.

Much life and laughter bustle in the late eve of this small city.

And comfort.

And excess.

I will have this. One day, I will have this for myself.

I bring my gaze down. The happy-maker is bowed with his forehead touching the concrete, palms up. James of the Pillars chastises him with quiet words, but I stop him from this.

A few moments pass before my husband forces out, “You may unbow.”

The man unbends and stands. He is the same height as my husband but does not meet his gaze.

I ball my fist, about to do him harm, but decide against it. He has given himself the worst punishment—he will never see Ancient Dreams again. Has lost Urban forever.

Plus, I do not want to get blood on the dress.

“How did you know I did not belong?” This is the only answer I must learn from the happy-maker.

Three hundred eighty-five years ago, dub Distribution War split all continents intub multiple regions. Be kind. Share. Yub favored show, Today in the Past!

“Full-gloss black shoes with a blue dress were in style this morn; they went out of style this aft.” Oh. “I am remorseful, miss.”

He no longer calls me “marm” but “miss.” A demotion. It cuts deeper than all else because he did not mean it to cut at all.

I stare at him. He has no jacket, and his complexion has already begun to lose its color. Thick tear streaks have cleared a path through his makeup. Under it, cavernous bags hang from his eyes, and a bruise sits on his green-tinged cheek. His head hangs like mine did.

He has less than we do. A lot less.

James of the Pillars watches us silently, his lip curled.

I move closer to the happy-maker. “Do you have enough for a taxi?”

He shakes his head. “I was to be paid today.”

Each of his words is clipped, painfully enunciated. Unlikely, but, “Do you live in Valley?”

“No, Abyss.” Oh, poor thing.

James of the Pillars touches my elbow as I reach into my purse. Leans near my ear. “You do not know what he will purchase with it. You know how these... people are.”

I pull away; he turns around. Walks far from us.

I dig around, pull fifteen thousand units from my purse, and place the large vials in the man’s hand. Urban taxis are expensive, and Abyss is two hundred miles away. Much too far to walk or risk asking for a share ride. Many are more desperate than him, and they will violently take their desperation out on him.

“Here. This should be enough to get you home. Be safe, my dear.”

He smiles at me, holding the three vials tightly. “Many thanks, miss.”

I pat his shoulder and give him 500 units more to purchase a filtering in Abyss. They cost so much there.

“I am truly remorseful,” he says. “I will never do such a thing again. I should not have. I thought you were his...”

He looks away.

Shame. That suffocating wave. It is all that is left in me. He thought many things about me—wife was never one of them.

James of the Pillars walks around us, pulls out his access card, and swipes it in front of the streetlight near the bike road. The scanner beeps.

His card’s metal is red. Its gold words and border glow brightly.

Under his image—*Legal*, under mine—*Illegal*. Like all Anomalies, he is legal in every city of our world, but when traveling with me, his card details his restrictions:

Two citizens, three-hour stay, Urban tub Valley, 160 miles. Late departs won't be tolerated.

Our hoverCar lands, and the door of an antique Noire Droptail opens. It has been altered and well restored. The top is down, and the dark rose-red paint gleams on the sleek design. I do not have to bend low; this is a tiny reprieve from this night.

I crash into the seat and call a taxi. Push a button to put the top up. Urban disappears behind the tinted windows, and we are surrounded by darkness.

“Husband.” My voice cracks at the end.

He holds me close as I squeeze my eyes closed, my chin shaking uncontrollably. I clench the dress in my fists. Rub my palm on the fabric. Sear its magnificence in my mind.

It is a rental, and tomorrow, I must return it.

This night was supposed to be perfect. Perfect. It has been anything but.

After a long while, I lift the dress, and he helps me adjust the prosthetic leg that chafes as my belly grows larger. Its withering top will leave a deep, bloody bruise above my pelvis bone.

TWO

MY BRACELET JANGLES in the wind; the handsomely designed letters glisten silver in the morn sunlight.

“How many inscriptions... have you purchased?” Marguerite, a seven-aged neighbor, asks in broken words. Broken because her breaths are long gasps. She sits across from me on my porch and glides her finger along the charms on my bracelet.

“How many letters have I?” I hold my arm aloft, letting the charms dangle. She counts.

The wind fades. The chirping dies. My breath pauses at the whirring. All disappear as my ears focus only on the light whine of the engine. Listen for any stutter. Any sign it will stop.

The white groundVan circles our block of fifteen homes. I put my hand to my chest, wishing to quiet my heartbeat as I watch it crawl by.

Lurk along the smooth concrete.

Red eyes scanning us from the driver's seat.

Neon red coating the groundVan's underbody so it glows in the night. My neighbors and their children pause too.

If we do not move, the driver may not question us or take us away.

Marguerite shivers. "I am scared of The BloodBid." Her voice is near silent as she taps her thigh quickly, her eyes following the groundVan's slow movement.

I set my hand on her panicked finger. Too loud. A giant sprinting for its life.

Shh. They will hear.

The whirring stutters and she grabs my hand. Squeezes it hard until all is quiet again. Only then does she stop humming lightly—and relax.

In Valley, we are unrelaxed a great many times each day. Far less than those in Abyss but more than other cities.

Three hundred ten years ago, Kuru Acid was discovered. Much needed to protect our brains. Do not forget to take yours. Your favored show, Today in the Past!

She wrinkles her nose before saying, "James of the Pillars enjoys Kuru Acid, but not me. I think it tastes funny."

World news, reminders, and Urban commercials pop up from the device implanted in the front of our brains—every hour, on the hour. Each feels like a tugging in my head, as if the information is a memory I have been trying to grasp. A moment later, it settles into an epiphany.

We will not forget the past.

She frowns. “What was I doing?”

“You were counting, my dear.”

She nods and tilts her head, counting my charms by twos again. Her maternal has taught her well. Though she smells of sewage and rotten lemons at all times, she is clever. If she continues this way, she may qualify for courses next year. Maybe.

Ding. 90,000 units.

Her hair is lackluster, like mine. Black braids frame her ears, their parts intricately designed in triangles. One hangs from each side of her face, dry like straw. She is an odd child with a washed-out complexion and slight wrinkles around her eyes. A lack of blood leads to that. I want her toffee color to bloom, but her paternal has gone ill—so this will not happen.

“My maternal has only one charm; you have eight. If you had one more, you would have... as many charms as I have fingers. That is wight.” She giggles. “Not wight! I meant—” She gasps and goes silent. Watches a girl a bit older than her. The same girl she has watched before.

A few homes from mine, the girl cranks the clothing line down to her height and holds up dingy, gray, patch-filled garments. The hooks close, and the line slides to the next open set.

I watch the girl a moment, too. A bell dings. It is from a memory long ago.

The girl's numbers pop up along her body. Considerations. Calculations. Criteria. Even without her smell or touch, I sum the amounts and make an assessment: 129,000 units. A decent number. With that, we could pay our housing's rent for four months.

Stop. No more.

Sourness twists my stomach. A creeping sludge of guilt. I shake my head to see the girl, not her numbers, but it has been so long since I began my position that I tally worth automatically.

Marguerite continues staring as the girl hangs clothing. When she finishes hanging, she turns, smiles, and holds her palm out. Not to me, but to this daring child next to me, who meekly holds up her palm in return.

The girl stands still, balancing the small basket on her head, and walks over. She is of a healthier weight than Marguerite but still thin. Agile with two above-the-knee prostheses. And yet, she hesitates with each step.

Halfway to us, the girl pauses again and peeks at Marguerite through her fingers. Seconds pass before she turns away and runs behind the home.

"I will marry her when I grow up." Marguerite's hand is still raised. "She will be my beloved." I touch her wrist, and she lowers it to her lap.

"First, you must be bold enough to ask if she has interest in you."

She taps her thigh, glances at me. "What if she says no?"

“Then you must be bold enough to leave, rejected, with confidence intact.”

She nods and taps her thigh once, hard. “Okay, I will ask her.”

I do not tell Marguerite her chances with the girl are favorable. I do not tell her the clothes, blowing in the wind, were dry when hung.

Instead, I rest a moment in Lower Valley 7. Squat, sagging, brightly-colored homes sit side by side, resting with me. Each batch of homes is separated by numbered streets. None worth enough to be given a name.

Each of our homes has a triangular front, rectangular back, six windows, and three stairs leading to the porches. They are identical except for the meticulous, varied paint and large numbers stretching from roof to floor.

1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9, 10, 11, 12, 13, 14, 15.

My voice, young, echoes in my head. I enjoyed strolling along the streets, counting our blocks of 15 x 15 homes to see if the builders had made any mistakes. Made something other than a square. They had not, and I adored them for that. It was pleasant to know someone in our world kept their promises.

I glance at my neighbors again. Rickety porch chairs trembling under the weight of ragged gray-clothed people resting from repairing their homes. Only a few are out here. Most are at their positions.

After many hours, they will return to unbroken concrete, tiny bushes, and no grass. Our past with dirt is unpleasant, so we have access to little.

Many years ago, The Dome planted small, inedible bushes on the side of the walkways. Each is under a clear, porous cage

ten feet apart from the next. They decided that *even we* need fresh oxygen.

It is all so... less.

I will not accept less. Why should I when there is more?

A shaking on my thigh.

“Did you know my brother hates pickles?”

“No, Marguerite, I did not know your brother hates pickles. Do you too? What is your favorite? Did you know pickles are infant cucumbers?”

“They are?!”

I laugh. “Yes.”

This child.

“The community garden only has infant cucumbers... but they do not taste like pickles.” Gasp. “Is it because they are old?”

“Little one, they are not pickles immed—”

“I love pickles coated with breadcrumbs, baked, and injected with red sauce.” She launches into her full history with pickles. I adore them as well, but I tune out the rest of her dissertation on the pros of pickles and why her brother is a fool for hating them.

Each home has a tiny patch of dirt in its side yard, surrounded by an invisible fence to prevent theft. Some citizens do not want to walk to the community garden, where we are rationed vegetables and fruit—the stale, soft, unwanted runts unfit for Urban.

“When he is older, he will... love pickles like me. I will teach him how.”

I shrug, still looking out.

Every home nearly overlaps the next. One citizen blends into the next. There is barely enough room to breathe.

I think on this until a clatter from our kitchen draws my attention. James of the Pillars. I hope he did not drop the ClearJuice; he can be clumsy.

Marguerite slouches on the soft seat of her leaning board, which she has propped up like a metallic pyramid behind her. Humming as she holds a hand to her chest. Resting a moment. It must take immense energy to talk from the sun's awakening to its sleep.

I stare at the board for a moment. Small, light to carry, strong. Helpful. But Lower Valley 7 is no place for sickliness, and requiring a leaning board is not a good sign.

I fear for her. The Dome severely cut her family's quota when her paternal fell ill. Though James of the Pillars has shared what little extra he has through the Donation Facility, it is not enough. She is in pain.

I am in pain. It is pulsating from my wrist. I lift my arm from my lap and adjust my bracelet. The ache from the thick scars surrounding my wrist lessens.

“What have you heard of your maternal's pay?”

She shrugs. “Not much. They discuss when I am in bed, but”—she cups her hands around her mouth and whispers loudly—“I heard my maternal and paternal talking. The Dome denied her... a stable rate.”

Oh. A stable rate would have been grand for her family.

I smile at her, thinking. Like most of us, she combines The Dome and its thousands of facilities into one. They are not the same, but there is little need to separate them. The Dome

dictates; the facilities enforce and collect. All belongs to The Dome.

Marguerite absentmindedly rubs the smooth area where her pinkie once was. She taps the skin—thinking, worrying. “If they lower her pay more... I will submit my arm as wight.”

She launches herself into my face and whispers, “Want to smell? I am O negative.”

Sweat gathers at my palms, and a panicked flush sweeps through my body after she says my name. I take deep breaths.

“Do not say my name. I have told you this.” I lean away from her. She stinks, and the universal blood donor type is not quite to my liking. Tolerable but overrated.

“The Dome will give much to my family.”

Yes, this may be true. Some markets adore sour blood like hers.

“But it is my maternal’s wish... to keep me as whole as possible. I do not understand why.” She prattles on, talking much on each breath. “My paternal painted my pinkie nail as a farewell... and the Wight-Harvester laughed. She laughed so hard. Did you know my maternal... did not allow me to be bled until I was aged a month? A month!”

Hmm. I stare off into the southern distance. Abyss. Turn to its opposite direction. Urban. I smell the oak seat beneath me. Feel the silky wine on my taste buds.

My better life. It will be grand.

“You should not be so keen to send yourself away, little Marguerite, lest someone else become just as keen, and you find yourself parted with only a torso and head to spare.”

I fall into deep contemplation until she giggles and hums softly. Her gasps for air fade as I sing the words in my head:

*Tiny child, loud mouth, and not a care
Broken toys, scraped knees, scolded when fair
Maternal signs and sends you there
Paternal signs, sends you where
To The Dome, To The Dome, for parts to snare
One of each paired organs to spare
A torso, a head, tiny child, a tiny pear*

I smile. My paternal sang this when I misbehaved. He always kissed my forehead before the last word, so I knew he would keep me.

All of me? I would ask him.

All of you, my angel.

“Do they take these as well?”

I open my eyes, grab her hand a moment before she pokes my left breast, and nod.

“In a half-bid, everything not life-sustaining is halved and auctioned.”

I remove the barrette hanging slightly askew from one of her braids and clip it back on straight.

Perfect.

The wind blows. Fresh today. I breathe in deeply but pull back when she shoves her arm to my nose.

Sewage and—

I tense my stomach against the loud growling, but it rumbles anyway, and I turn from her. My assessment is wrong; her true scent is hidden.

Ding.

I—my brain—I recalculate her numbers. Her blood is immensely sweet; it is decadent like Diane Candies, the best in all our world. I had a few as a child. Just five units for each back then. My mouth hangs open as her numbers sum. Bids for her wight would be astronomical.

On smell alone, millions of units. On age, so tender, tens of thousands more. City of origin, thousands less. Complexion—

2,100,000 units.

I shake my head as she smiles.

“I know. Two years ago, the Wight-Harvester told my paternal... I would make very, very sweet wight.” Her tone is boastful.

Clearly, she has forgotten her wistfulness. Though, if she were bid, there would be nothing left of her to be wistful for.

Distracted, my hand rests on my prosthetic knee. The metal is cold even though I wear thin black shorts under my dress. I press a finger against the unnaturally thin leg. Nothing. Press harder. Lifeless.

I promise this. His voice. Soft. Reassuring.

My paternal was wrong. This leg is not mine. It will never be mine. I put my hand on my birth leg. The warmth is comforting.

Marguerite sniffs her arm, and her stomach rumbles hard. Louder than mine, though she is unable to smell her blood's sweetness.

She sticks out her tongue. I slap her cheek lightly.

"No. Autodevouring is not allowed." Perhaps her intellect is not as promising as it seems.

She drops her head. "Apologies."

Just thirty minutes ago, I gave her half a pound of wight from the gray markets of Second Australia and four small, green tomatoes, but it is not enough.

Of course not. She has weeks of hunger.

"Smelling only. Never, ever autodevour. It is illegal. You know this."

A small thud comes from the kitchen. Marguerite stares at the porch's spongy, reeking, rotten wood until I tap the underside of her chin.

"Look at me." She lifts her eyes to mine, and I return a stern gaze. "You know the consequences, yes?"

She nods.

Four hundred years ago, green skin alterations were to perish for. You could get them for no cost. Ha, ha. Your favored show, Today in the Past!

I get to my feet and help her to hers.

"Come inside, my dear, have some ClearJuice."

THREE

THE FRONT DOOR creaks as I open it.

“Your door is hideous.” Marguerite slips off her shoes and walks through.

This is true. As all citizens do, we decorated our door with intricate spray-painted images and words from Urban commercials, but our design did not turn out well. James of the Pillars is a horrid artist. I would not trust him to draw a straight line. And so, because our designs must be combined, our home never wins the annual prize: A week-long trip to work in Horizon. Second only to Urban’s grandness.

I stand on the mat and take off my shoes. Use my foot to line them with James of the Pillars's.

Though I am only five months along, my stomach is immense. I cannot bend and scrub them clean anymore, so I stare at them and adjust them little by little.

Tiny jittering bubbles pop under my skin like spiders under their maternal's sack. I move the left shoe in front of the right. Make sure its heels touches the others' front.

Pop, pop, pop.

Crooked still. I can make this right. Better. I focus harder.

Forward a bit. Back. A bit to the right. There.

My shoulders drop. The bubbles grow smaller and smaller.

After the shoes are in a perfect line, I walk into our kitchen. The door locks behind me. A series of codes click, and three deadbolts turn.

Eww. I fan the air.

Marguerite's odor is concentrated in the small room, mixing with the vanilla-scented cleaning products James of the Pillars used. She reeks.

Soft music, Urban commercials, and the world news play at all times from the invisible speakers in one wall. In every room. In every home. They create a holographic screen during the news and commercials.

Gentle wheezes add to the mix. Marguerite.

She comes every Thurs and stays a few hours. To eat our food. To talk incessantly. To annoy me. Long ago, my husband and I decided to help her anyway.

James of the Pillars sits in the far corner of the room. Marguerite at the square, wooden table in the middle, facing

me, kicking her feet. A patched, mostly gray dress hangs along her body, and a bit of cushion bulges from one of her thin slippers. Not my best sewing job. I will fix it later.

Her back is to our sink, and our two-burner stove sits to her left. During the snowflake season, it keeps her warmer.

She hums to herself while tracing the decorative lines in the wood.

“It is so nice. I like it.”

I smile. Sometimes, she is not so annoying.

Years ago, I carved intricate Urban designs into the pine to make our marriage official. I spent weeks picking out the most beautiful work I could find, as that is my family’s tradition.

“You must put your best into the wood. Into all you do, my dear daughter.” My maternal carves the new pine a few days after my parents’ marriage renewal. The high sound of her chisel is soothing, and I am entranced as I watch her tease out the smallest of slivers.

We bend down opposite each other, an inch from the wood. She flares her red-painted nostrils, and I laugh as she sniffs the pine deeply.

“Smell.” Blows the sweet scent in my direction.

Dirt, a fresh breeze, her sweat, and a slightly buzzing life are in the table. I close my eyes, and for a long while, we rest, enjoying all the flavors of the fallen tree.

I blink, grinning at our table. On the other side is horrid plastic. Intentional. During audits, we flip it over and show that. It is safer that way.

Dim light comes from the paneling covering the ceilings and walls of our three-room home; it is warm because we saved enough to purchase wind-powered heating coils two years ago.

The coils glow a faint orange and protrude from the walls in triangular designs. Unsafe to touch.

I put on my slippers—left one first—and walk to the right of the table, running my finger along the countertop's surface. Over the molder on top of it and onto the stove. A bit more countertop and to the fridge. Stop at our sink.

A small pinecone sits behind the faucet. I leave it there and scrub lavender sand into my hands to cleanse them. Relax as I inhale the pleasant, spicy scent. See Ancient Dream's twinkling lights spinning above me. Crunch into fresh wax beans filled with red sauce. Hear strong rhythmic beats mixed with dark cellos.

Urban.

Not now. Not yet. Right now, I use a bit of our water to wet the sand and wipe it along my nose. Marguerite is behind me, and I must lessen her stench immediately.

Sewage and lemons. Her maternal chose an excellent combination to hide her true worth. Who would ever get close enough to know she does not smell like a toxic waste plant?

As I scrub more, I stare at the wall in front of me, envisioning our bedroom on the other side. The books. The wrinkles on his side of the bed. The locked office opposite it.

Our home is like all others, except for the walk-in closet in our bedroom and the books. Urban-approved books are everywhere. In the kitchen, our bedroom, the toilet room. Protected in plastic wrap and stacked in bookshelves, the cupboards, and our dresser. Biology, chemistry, prosthetics, history, and so many more.

I have read a few to learn the past, look at the beautiful artwork of our ancestors, but most of them are not for me. They are for James of the Pillars—so he and the other Anomalies can create our future.

“We only have mango sand at my house. My sister’s hands got so big... she is allergic to the others. I helped her with her hair. Her favored style has... three ponytails.” Pause. Wheeze. “I do not know how to do hair well yet, but she... wore it anyway.” Marguerite laughs.

“It is good mango is available then, little one.”

James of the Pillars sits to my left, at the tiny makeshift table tucked into the corner of our kitchen. It is nothing more than a piece of black-painted circular wood atop a similarly painted barrel, but my husband did not want more.

I do not know why. Maybe when you have as much as he did, does, you tire of it and crave having less.

His head hangs. The missing patches in his hair are a stark reminder of our life. Every few seconds, he rubs his hair, and slivers of his dull, black curls float to the floor.

Oh, my husband.

He is just 26-aged, but there is an immense wornness to him.

I walk past our bedroom door and stop in front of him.

A needle pulls blood from him, pumps it through an attached tube, and gives his blood back without its plasma. The ClearJuice drips into the container built into the machine. Yellow. Poorly named.

He is as rundown as the rest of us.

But not truly. Never truly.

James of the Pillars holds a finger to his forehead and ends his first Innova of the day. His exhale is silent as the near-transparent film over his mouth hides his words, keeping Urban business in Urban.

Two more films cover his ears, eliminating noise. Innovation Sessions require hours, intense focus, and a place of silence. As he despises being alone, he does not often go into his office to complete his Innovas.

He lifts his head; a red overlay covers his eyes. His face is scrunched in imaginings and thought and anger that create deep lines between his eyebrows. He exhales, and the red disappears from his eyes. It is extremely early, but he has already been laboring for three hours.

There will be no more rest for him this day.

A minute later, he blinks. When he notices me, he smiles and stands from the seat. I bow and smile back.

“Husband, here.” I hold a Jam Bar out to him, sweet with fruit and large white onions laced across its top.

My gaze crawls along the curves and angles of him—the tiny mole at the top of his ear, the awkward way he stands, not too tall, 68 inches, but gangly in the arms and knees, how he holds his head back a little, always ready to laugh.

That laugh. I adore that laugh.

The films split in half and flatten into his skin, each a soft, permanent alteration to his face. After five years together, I can hardly feel them.

“Let us give her six oz. Take her home after, my love.” His voice has a rough edge to it. Weariness. Impatience. He is in need of rest and cheering and more rest.

I kiss his lips. Press the bar into his hand until he takes it from me. A small anchor inside me sits. Toilet. Now.

In there, I pull out a magazine of Urban's finest artists—Joshua of the Tiles, king of the haunting charcoal portraits. Moloch of the Lords, master of the 5D sculptures. Ann of the Roads. I am not sure what they draw, but the mixture of small, sculpted rocks and pencil drawings is beyond captivating. I trail my hand along the page and return to our kitchen.

An unease whispers in my mind. I take the cloth my husband offers and wipe the seat clean even though streaks remain from when he did the same. After the trembling lessens, I hold his hand and sit slowly.

“Many apologies for my rudeness. Thank you for this.” He leans down and kisses me. Lower to kiss my belly.

He tastes of dirt, vomit, and love.

“A grand morn. I am most excited to see you,” he whispers this to our conceived and rubs my stomach a few times. “I will be glad when you are birthed; I want to see far less of your maternal.”

I push him from me. “Get away. Your voice sickens him. Feel.” I pull his hand back to me and press it deep into my skin. No movement. “See? You have paralyzed him.”

We stare at each other. His laughter breaks through first. Good. This is a joke he does not know. I have memorized many books so I can joke with him.

His chuckle is quiet and breathy. Has always been that way. When we are old, I hope he will let me hear him fully.

Marguerite cackles loudly.

“What is so funny, little one?” I look at her, staring at us.

“I do not know, but I want to be happy, too.”

This child.

He puts the bar in his pocket and stands.

The machine hangs from the wall next to him. After it makes a loud buzzing sound, the heat suction loosens. He pulls the needle out and dabs invisiband on his skin; it seals his blood in.

The machine starts its cleansing process as he pours the liquid into his cup. After swiping a finger across his forehead to snooze an Innova request, he shuffles over to Marguerite and tickles her cheek. She giggles and lies her head on the table, her second fruit bar near gone.

He sits across from her, perched on the edge, and hands her his cup—tiny Js printed all over it.

She takes the ClearJuice but does not drink.

“Drink now. It will cool soon,” I say to her. ClearJuice is best when fresh from the body.

We watch the wall’s hologram. Today in the Past! is not on; the 3 and a half world news is. The newscaster highlights different continents and their regions on a public Need Map.

The information is limited, the trends simplified.

I view the same Need Map in more detail in my device. Rotate Valley’s Map to analyze the sun’s temperatures over the last months. Zoom in to focus on the week, and next, the day. 88.532 degrees Fahrenheit on average.

There has been a tiny increase in Lower Valley 4, but I do not believe a spike will happen in our region soon. How excellent.

Marguerite turns to me. “I do not under—”

“We are good.”

More charts fill my vision. Water, vegetation, and wight levels from all over our world. Rows upon rows of information. Numbers fill my mind. I calculate the vegetation levels in Third Asia—50 million metric tons—and request more from The Dome.

Adding, subtracting, dividing. Continents, regions, cities.

Full access to the Maps is given to those who sort. Me. Others with similar abilities. We can see all our world, and that is comforting to me.

James of the Pillars sighs hard. “Of course they are in need.”

First America. Along with many Third and Fourth regions, it is green. In need. Other continent’s cities, mainly Valley and Abyss, are yellow. Soon to be in need. The remaining regions are red. Good for now.

One immense expanse of land, south of us, could always be red if it wanted. Could always be good.

“The Republic of United First Regions.” He shakes his head. “Yesterday, they added two more fleets. A month ago, three.”

“That is five fleets.” Marguerite pipes up. He looks at her and smiles.

Yes, five more from Abyss. Many guards are leased from there; they train all their lives to get the chance to join the pawn lines.

As The Republic of United First Regions is home to The Dome’s most powerful headquarters, it is heavily guarded, and all six of the First regions surround this massive campus.

Mighty sentries at their stations.

Within their walls, representatives from each continent convene and issue laws.

For the rest of us.

I blow out a breath. “As usual, First America requests much wight. Even after all these centuries—even after the Distribution War—they cannot tell a need from a want.”

Greediest of all the First regions, First America requests thighs and hearts and shoulders from The Dome every three months to feed their plump citizens.

Marguerite pounds her fist on the table. “Second America is not so selfish.”

James of the Pillars and I laugh.

“You are correct, little one. We are not.” He smiles at her. “If we were one of The Dome’s headquarters regions, we would have more say. All would have plenty to eat.”

“All? Even those in Abyss?” At my words, he turns to me, scrunches his face. No answer. “You voted against giving them assistance last month.”

Marguerite watches him. He pauses. “Those people do not even try to improve their lives.”

“You do not know that.”

“Yes, I do. You have never been there, but I have visited Abyss during many Imagine Trips. I have seen their laziness. Dirtiness. Criminality. They are not like us.”

“And I am not like you.”

We stare at each other.

Why can he never see how wrong he is? I allow myself this thought and push away the deeper one that plagues me, pushes me to defend the Abyssites, argue over them: in his true heart, does he think the same of me?

“You are hurting them,” I say, but he is tense and silent now.

A few minutes later, he hands out Kuru Acid tablets and lights the stove to make the morn meal. Making soothes him. After he drops the fluffy wight dumplings into a sweet and spicy potato soup, he takes one more tablet, just in case.

It will protect his brain from the wight's sickness. A lethal sickness for us all.

Marguerite is louder now. Angry at the news.

I wait until she finally quiets. "Husband, when First America travels up the Panamal, they will take much of Abyss's wight. Your vote could help those citizens."

He turns to me as he scrambles his meal. "Yes, it could."

"But you will vote against them." My voice rises. "Even though your parents are Commo—"

"Those people are not like them; my parents are Urban-born." He turns the temperature to its lowest setting and taps the spatula on the pan's edge. Looks at both of us. "And those people are nothing like you. Know that."

I get up. Leave to tidy our bedroom.

What is wrong with that man?

During your Gold Week, submit all of your Gold every morn to receive one premium unit in your local currency. We should not have to say this, but do not falsify your output. Your favored shon, Today in the Past!

I walk to the room's far end, yank at the Sapphire blue cover, and tuck it in the corners. My stomach is heavy, and the band of my prosthesis keeps slipping down. It is an old model, and the vintage part costs much. Even with our savings, we could not afford it.

I will be glad when my new leg comes, but for now, I hold onto the support bar on the wall and move slowly as I convert

our bed to a sofa. Something is wrong. A small lump sticks out from under the cover. I pull it out; it is a cranberry bar.

Why does that man hide food?

I tuck the bar deep into the crevice it came from, and when I am done smoothing out every wrinkle, I set the pillows down gently.

The sofa has done nothing to me.

Our filtering machines are next. James of the Pillars's is bolted to the floor at the far end of the couch. Mine is on the side nearer our dresser. I wipe all the dust off of our machines and check their tubes for nicks or wear.

Nothing. They are perfect.

The table now. Crooked. I place its legs back in the grooves in the carpet, and an anxious bubble pops inside of me and melts into a calm pool.

Onto the dresser. I straighten the long cloth that covers the top of our tall dresser and hangs over the sides. Its design is a chaotic mixture of gold triangles and swirls on a Sapphire blue background. Not surprising, the chaos. It was made in Valley.

My pages of drawings and notes on Urban's clothing, food, and cultural trends are in its drawers, protected in plastic slips. I pull a few out. Vibrant reds, yellows, and most other colors pop off the pages. Dark shadows and gentle lights. I spent hours making them photorealistic, so I can dream through them.

I run my finger along the lines of the dresses and suits, feeling my rental dresses' fabric and James of the Pillars's clothing. Waterfalls of more.

I leave the small notebook out and close the drawer. Urban commercials will come on later, and I will have time to look at these pictures then.

One more thing: the teddy.

Today, it is holding a pinecone. I pick up the stuffed bear from the middle of the dresser and adjust the red ribbon around its neck. Too long on one side. I tie the strip slowly, savoring the texture. It is Horizon-made. Magnificent. Soft like warm cookies.

James of the Pillars bought it for our conceived a month ago. I smooth the teddy's ears back. Grin at its placid smile, the message sewn into its belly: *Hugs make me happy.*

I place it on the top of the dresser again, right where I picked it up. I am not in a hugging mood.

No hugs for you today.

Across from our bed is a long and wide walk-in closet: James of the Pillars's office. Its barrier is dark now but becomes transparent when it allows him through.

During shortages, I am permitted to go in there. "For my safety." The space is massive and silent, empty but for a chair, couch, and long table. When I was there last, I could not see my husband's innovations or plans, as they looked like blank pages, but he organizes in a horizontal fashion. Pages spread across the whole table.

His couch and chair. Oh, they were paradise. Sapphire blue dermer with black leather pillows sewn with gold thread.

I smile, thinking on the drawer built into the bottom of his sofa. It was filled with the musky, sweet, rich smell of him. His



suits hold his scent. Stunning Urban suits of many colors, including red. He is allowed to wear red.

And not one is a rental.

FOUR

MARGUERITE COUGHS. A deep, phlegm-filled sound. She has gotten too wound up at the news. I peek into the kitchen from our bedroom. James of the Pillars is holding a cup of water. He glances at me and smirks before stirring in a spoon of powdered marrow to soothe her throat.

“It does help.” I cross my arms.

“Uh-huh.”

“You should not dote on her. She must learn her own limits.”

He places the cup in her hand. “She will learn many limits.”

Yellowed and tasting metallic, Marguerite takes a long drink

of First America's partially filtered water. We are lucky. Third America receives our used water and Fourth America theirs. By that time, it has traces of feces in it.

"We have half a gallon left for this week, my love." He marks our remaining amount on the sheet above the sink and turns back to the news.

The newsperson points to many regions. "As you can see, First America, Third Asia, Fourth Australia"—they list other regions for a minute—"need your immediate assistance. Go to your nearest branch of The Dome and send your cancered wight to help our Third and Fourth Region citizens. Be kind. Share."

"My paternal can help them." Marguerite smiles as she zones back into the news. James of the Pillars watches the screen a while longer and comes to our bedroom door. He caresses my cheek.

His hands are cold, and the nails of most of his fingers have broken off. Three charms dangle from his wrist. I glance at his barcodes. They are dark like mine but would glow if he ever took his Vow.

He will not.

I have no idea why he will not. Maybe he fears what The Dome will ask of him, but what more can they ask of him than they already do?

I want him to take his Vow. We could have a better life.

I could have a better life.

He hands me a small, warm container from his back pocket. It is a pain-relieving salve. My last one ran out yesterday. I open it, rub a little on the thick, jagged scars surrounding my wrist,

and do the same to the other wrist. Minty vanilla soothes my pain. I hold it under my nose. Sniff deeply. *Mm*. It smells like wealth. Comfort. Excess. Urban.

“Many thanks.” I screw the lid on slowly. Tighten it until it could not fathom turning more. None will be wasted. “How did you get this?”

“Chevaughn gave it to me. Yesterday, I mentioned you would be in pain today.”

Oh.

He is allowed to ask his Keepers for small comforts for me. Tiny comforts and no more.

He looks out the small window to the left of the door. “They wait so long. Often, I ask them for small things I do not need. Send them far so they can stop... waiting.”

A trickling starts in my chest.

Tap, tap, tap...

The worthy move at their leisure. All else must wait.

No. I shake my head.

Tap, tap, tap...

No more.

A minute later, when the ache in my wrist has subsided, the sadness is gone.

I reach out to him, cup his chin, and run my thumb along his lips. “I will wait for your return. In the morn, you can help me apply this balm under my belly.”

He quirks his eyebrows up, goes back to the stove.

This man.

I spritz my hair with vanilla peach perfume, place the container on the dresser, and go back to the kitchen.

Anomalies, Near Nobility produces the best brains to siphon. Put in your requests early so we can teach to your specifications. Your favored show, Today in the Past!

Often, this show gives random information. I do not know why they chose that title.

James of the Pillars makes two bowls, carries one, and sets it in front of Marguerite. I pick up the other and sit at the circular table in the back of the room.

The news comes back on:

“From this—” Screams. A woman, kicking and crying with blood dripping down her wrists, goes through The Dome’s broilers. She shrieks once more, and her skin darkens and bubbles.

We shake our heads. Marguerite pounds her fist on the table again. “What an awful person.”

“They always are.” James of the Pillars scrambles his meal.

“—to this.” A bell dings and the camera circles a magnificent table with a piece of broiled wight on it: Well-done, cut into strips, fanned out over brown rice, topped with vegetables, and grandly arranged on a plate. Red sauce is drizzled on the plate, and thin slices of garlic are sprinkled on top. We all stare.

James of the Pillars turns to me and licks his lips. Urban’s wight. Delicious.

I lean back, forcing myself to relax. I was given the day off because The Dome’s sorting machines are malfunctioning. I

offered to do paperwork, but they gave the work to students instead.

Makes no sense. They will learn as they do more, while I must pay back each hour I am not working.

Breathe. I do and feel calmer. Watch my husband.

With two (he did not need two) Kuru Acid tablets digested, his brain is safe to eat what he likes. What he is allowed. I shake my head, watching him finish making his morn meal. A towel sits under his plate.

He turns to me. Winces and touches his forehead as an urgent Innova is announced. He snoozes the loud shout into his thoughts. "I will not be available most of today." I did not think he would be. The most intense Innovas last many days. "Go on, wife, say what you choose."

He stuffs rogue crumbled brains and pieces of a small onion back into the two corn shells.

"You will believe eating someone else's brain can boost your creative ability, but not that powdered marrow is an excellent medicine." I sip the soup as he takes a bite and nods. "Beloved, listen closely: Brain siphoning is a myth told to you by a stupid child when you were a stupid child. The science has disproven it, but do you truly want to know how I know your logic is flawed?" He nods and takes another bite, staring into my eyes. "I knew Alejandro. He was brilliant. If his brain benefitted you, we would have seen evidence of that by now."

He chokes, laughing. "Is that so?"

"Yes. It. Is."

A third bite and the first shell is gone. Marguerite giggles as he moves closer to me, smiling and holding out the second one.

I settle back in the seat. Maybe that will calm our conceived. His kicks are like ships crashing to the earth. They will leave bruises.

James of the Pillars takes a bite. Half is gone. I do not know why he eats so quickly, but he crunches once more, and nothing is left.

He stops for a moment, confused as to why he has nothing to taunt me with—“you eat like a paper shredder!” Marguerite reminds him—and turns away to clean his plate.

After putting it away, he moves behind me and places the towel over my eyes. Under it, I can still see our home. The cracks in the walls are blended smooth; it is more beautiful in its blurriness.

James of the Pillars massages my shoulders and neck, and I relax even more when he moves to my head, circling his fingers against my scalp.

A while later, he whispers in my right ear, “We could spare 100 units for one of her medicines. Discuss.”

I pull the towel away and look at him. “Hmm. I took inventory of our shared ledger yesterday. We do not have enough.” I move closer to him. As my other ear is unhearing, the news’ noise makes it hard to place sounds.

“We have enough for the month, and I am qualifying for a second position heading another engineering team. Also, I have been assigned extra hours because of a new... project.”

New projects cause him much pain. And me. I twist the towel tight and rub the leg of my chair with it.

I do not want him to go.

It has been five years since he left to work in Urban. Since he spent months in his Innovation Room there. When requested, he must always go, or The Dome will not allow him to come back. But still, I do not want him to go.

He touches my arm. "I will return, my love."

I squeeze the towel in my hand as he moves in front of me. Rubs my stomach with one hand and taps his chest with the other. Too little blood leads to many kinds of pain, and more of our blood quota is given to me because of my pregnancy.

"We cannot spare 100 units, my dear." I run my hand down his cheek's dulled skin. "You cannot. You receive so little daily. Look at you."

"Look at her. What if she was your child? Where is your empathy?"

I remove his hand from my belly and press his fingertips to my lips.

"It is with you. You give too much. Are you attempting to autodevour?" I blow on his fingers, hoping my warm breath will relieve an inkling of his suffering.

James of the Pillars pulls them from me. "Send her away, then. Pray to the Inventor she makes it to her home."

"You know I do not believe in the Inventor, but I will ensure she gets there." He will no longer look at me. A grimace hangs from the corners of his mouth. *You deserve more, my love,*

and I cannot give it to you. I turn him to me. He bends, and I kiss his quivering chin.

“Husband, know this: we are well.”

He goes to the table and leans on it as I finish my soup.

We relax until a news update shows on the wall.

The headline scrolls as the newsperson speaks, “The Dome is determining whether there is still a need for additional research or continued funding into The Blaze. Reports from the First regions show little progress—and most certainly no breakthroughs—has been made by the Anomalies.”

“We are trying.” He holds his forehead. Ruffles his hair as he stares at the screen.

Marguerite swallows a spoonful. “Perhaps you should try harder. Or find smarter Anomalies.”

We exchange a glance, he and I.

This child.

He bends to my ear and whispers, “Do not ask, and you shall still receive.”

I hold in my laughter. “Be kind.”

He presses his lips together before talking softly, “Yes, we should try harder, but little one, intelligence is not all Anomalies provide our world.”

“I know this. Commons are smart as well.” She points to me. “My maternal loathes Anomalies... but you do not seem awful at all.”

Awful? James of the Pillars?

I glance at his ears. It is a good thing his listeners are set to an extremely low-offense level. The Dome is always listening, and I do not want Marguerite to be punished for her honesty.

He helps me stand. “Why does your maternal think that? Anomalies save our world.”

Marguerite shrugs.

I go to the toilet, wondering at her maternal’s strange belief. When I return, there is B negative in the air. Warm and savory.

My husband is halfway out the door, and Marguerite’s head is bowed. She stares at him still, muttering, near quiet for once. Her arm hangs in the air, hand outstretched toward him. The other pinches her dress, rubs its fabric between her fingers.

“Oh, that is how it is between us. You slink away like a scoundrel, with no farewell to your wife?” I smile, but he does not as he walks back in.

He wears a suit from Urban. A red glow comes from it. Like Marguerite, I stare. Vibrant yellow triangles on thick, flickering, layered, black fabric. Shimmering holographic words. The Dome’s crest over his chest. No matter how many times he wears one, it is just as magnificent. Real, and here in Valley.

What if our conceived is like him? Oh, it would be so grand.

He comes to me. I bow my head, instinctual in the presence of an Anomaly.

“I... was going to... just go.” After swiping his hand gently along my hair to lift my head, he does the same to his own, front to back. The gesture radiates confidence and a hint of snobbishness he does his best to hide. But when he wears his

birth city's clothing, he settles completely into his true position in our world—a six-dot Anomaly. Brilliant. Rare.

Marguerite's eyes flit to every part of the suit and focus on the train trailing him, repelling dirt.

"You do not need to run from me. I know you are—" *more than me*. My voice is tight, laced with feelings I want to hide from him but cannot.

"I..." He watches me, and I drop my head.

Moments pass until I can look at him again. He tries so hard to be smaller, match us, but he cannot stuff himself into a life not made for him. He must wear these clothes when going to Anomaly functions, and one thing is undeniable: Urban fits him perfectly.

"You are most handsome."

"I am a shadow to y—"

I hold up a hand and shake my head. His words only make it worse. They will never be true.

"I want clothes like that," Marguerite speaks my feelings. Plain. Exact. I swallow them. The want. The awe. The pain.

I hug my husband, though the taste of rot fills my mouth.

He steps back. "I will be outside, my love."

I do not understand him. Have never understood why. But my life is what he prefers. What he craves. He could have everything our world has to offer, and yet he chooses *this*.

How lucky he is to have a choice.

Marguerite's head rests on the table as she hums a complicated piece taught to her by a neighbor. Her ClearJuice is half-gone.

I walk toward her, pulling our second chair with me as quietly as I can, and listen. Her perfect pitch is another sign of her intelligence.

I pause, close my eyes, and let her clear, sweet tone wash over me for a moment. Open them again.

She hums Antoine of the Glades's Sixth Sonata in A Minor and seems content to be alone more than most children I have seen. Though perhaps that is because she is rarely alone at home. As of her newest brother, K, she has five siblings. I assume with that many children to care for, no one bothered to give him a proper name. Still, with her desire to be alone, most likely, she will be a Third before booking one. I set the chair across from her and start my search for the B negative.

Where is it coming from?

I smell again. The oven. I open it. No, a cupboard above it. I pull out a small dish sitting on a towel. Steam seeps from under its lid.

I sit and place it in front of me. A note is taped to the top. It reads *A surprise for you and our infant*. Under it, sage and onions sprinkled on wight.

I sniff, *mm*, and take a bite. His tongue is a little sharp for my taste, always was, but James of the Pillars has cooked Alejandro just right. Slightly chewy. Soft, tender inside with a nice crunch on the outside. I take another bite. His swollen taste buds slide across mine, spreading seasoned oil and spicy onions. Tart. Earthy.

So good. Oh, so good.

I bend lower. Smell the steam of him. Catch a hint of that buzzing life that remains in all things. His flavor explodes in my mouth. Savory B negative mixed with cardamom and spicy Nyroot.

Brown eyes, tiny cleft in her chin. His infant has the same blood type. Salty, though, not savory. I met her once.

Will she need glasses like him? Always be one snipe away from being reprimanded like him? Make others laugh like him?

I chew him more, thinking on her. How Alejandro spread ointment on her elbows' fresh barcodes and cooed away every one of her watery hiccups. How he adored her. How she would have loved him.

I pause, a small, fatty mass between my teeth. Not savory at all now. I set my fork on the plate, the last piece of him still on its tines.

She will never know him. Not even wonder. His daughter will get a new paternal, and her old one will never be mentioned. I swallow him slowly.

185,000 units.

Would she think that is enough? Is there a number enough for memories stolen? How many have I taken?

I stare down at Alejandro. Close the lid on him.

“Little one, is that your favorite of Antoine of the Glades’s songs?”

“No, it is my least favorite.”

She continues humming, softer than before. I listen with no more commentary. Though she is in my home, this moment is a private one.

She stops humming and bolts upright so quickly she blurs.
Whirring.

Marguerite and I stare at the door. No whirring.

We jump when three strong knocks sound through the window.

“I did nothing wrong!” A man screeches. There is a small scuffle, a grunt, and after, a groundVan’s door slams shut.

Whirring. Silence.

Marguerite looks at me, her finger tapping like a hummingbird’s wings. “The BloodBid only takes rogues, right? That man... did something wrong, right?”

I nod.

“I am scared of The BloodBid more than him.”

“You do not know who he is or what he has done.”

“No, but they did not have to be so mean.”

She pouts a moment before gulping the last remnants of the beverage. The man seeming to have disappeared from her thoughts. I stare at her throat. *Ding.*

Her youthful vocal cords could help her family immensely, especially when combined with her pitch and flavor. 125,000 units at least.

I am curious to ask her why she hums her least favorite song with such passion, but I will wait until I walk her home. She watches me, watching her. “I will donate my vocal cords... when I am older. I will never sell them. That will cheapen them, right?”

Her position is understandable, and she is wise to defend it, but these are the thoughts of a child.

Hmm, maybe tomorrow. Today, I will leave her in the dark.
“Yes, Marguerite, they are priceless.”

She smiles. “My eighth birth day is coming. Do you think... I will reach Vow age?”

That is a year after her new age.

She gets up in slow segments of movement. Stiff now, like a poorly maintained 100-aged woman. We do not have enough wight, ClearJuice, medical treatment, or anything else to give her a youthful vigor. Or to prolong her life.

“What makes you so sad?” She grabs the cup.

“My conceived causes me pain.” It is better to lie, sometimes.

She pushes the chair in. It squeals against the worn, dingy tiles, and she hums the high tone by reflex. Soon, she transforms her leaning board into a walker. Its four wheels are still in good shape, but one of the metal handles will need another cushion soon. She goes to the molder to the right of the stove.

“What’cha want, marm?” Her face is serious. She wishes to become a happy-maker so she can ‘talk all day and bring joy.’

“I wanna plate-uh.” That small addition. The Western Urban accent. So grand.

She puts the cup in the molder and presses a button; it grumbles loudly, buzzes, and opens. When she turns to me, I scan the plate: It is scuffed, and a bulge disrupts its bottom. But that does not damper her enthusiasm.

Since she was two-aged, I have half-listened to her incessant chatter. I know her well. She wants to attempt a

happy-maker move that would greatly impress. Her hand shakes lightly, but I do not stop her. I only observe what she will choose to do. She lifts the plate, looks at it, and flips it once. Smiles widely.

“I will not do more. If I fumble, you will have to purchase another... for your food and beverage.”

I wash the dishes, grab jackets from our bedroom, and head outdoors. The front door creaks closed and locks itself.

We bow to James of the Pillars. He is sitting on the concrete of our side yard, slumped over in his magnificent yellow suit. It is far brighter than the most vibrant home’s paint.

Crumbs fall into his lap. Collect there. He does not wipe them away. Does not notice his suit’s beauty or savor its silky feel. It is nothing special to him.

He has worn Urban clothing all his life.

I go to him and drape his blue jacket over his shoulders; it flares and shifts to match his suit’s color. He does not move, only stares at the ground, thinking hard, pushing dirt into his mouth as our ancestors did during the famines. He eats more than most people, as he enjoys the taste and smell of it.

After swallowing, he whispers to himself a while and holds a finger to his forehead. His eyes glaze over. Turn red as he joins a brief meeting. My husband leads the others, talking much as he pinches the dirt. Smells it. Eats it while he is listening.

I walk to Marguerite before pausing and watching him. A message pops in my head. I swipe my forehead and dismiss the weekly scheduled event: *7 and a half morn. Husband must be milked.*



“Farewell, James of the Pillars.” Marguerite sucks in a breath. “Enjoy the dirt!” She sounds bright, naïve, like a seven-
aged child should, but when she looks at me, a soul far more
exhausted than mine stares back. “I like dirt. I will join him the
next time I visit.”

“He will like that.”

James of the Pillars’s lips are bloody. He has not been
careful of the tiny rocks. I trail my eyes down him. The suit
hangs from him. He has grown so thin these last few months.

I regret our conception was successful, but not for long.

We will have that better life.

I will guarantee it.

FIVE

MARGUERITE AND I hold our palms out to my husband even though we will not receive an answer in return. It will not be a grand day for him. He hates being called to duty but going to the milking station is necessary. Anomaly females need his sperm.

A flash of Sapphire blue, then another, then another, move behind a home. The three of them step into the light, statue still in a triangular formation, arms to their sides, palms up. Their beautiful Urban suits flare and change color to match James of the Pillars's.

One walks to my husband and buttons his jacket. Goes

back to the others.

They stand near fifteen feet behind him, waiting for him to ask something of them. Anything. The Dome refused his request to be alone in Valley, so his Keepers wait all day.

I do not know what to make of all my husband has, is, how little it means to him, so I push it from my mind and make nothing of it. I do not want to become bitterness and envy.

We turn toward Marguerite's home. She lives in the four-room section, one mile south.

It is 4 and a half, so the sun is not beating down on us yet, but every couple of minutes, she must rest.

Four hundred seventy years ago, citizens were allowed to have any life position they wanted. They languished. Most never found their purpose, and much potential was unmet. Be glad our world has The Vow. Your favored show, Today in the Past!

The streets are emptier than usual. Soft light comes from the strips implanted in the ground and casts a glow for the maternals, paternals, and children out working. The light reflects off the charms dangling from the parents' wrists. Most have at least two.

Some families gather dirt to put in their meals; others hum tunes as they work, and a third shout at one another, cursing the early hour, ineptitude, or broken tools. As we have done with Marguerite, a few families help—and get help—from one neighbor child.

I must make it back home by 6 morn.

We stop, and I adjust the strap of my prosthetic. Even with a cover under it, it twists and digs into my waist. Always a reminder of what I lost. And what I will have again.

It has been months, and I am still waiting for James of the Pillars's newest version to arrive. Still missing the magnificent prosthesis he made me. It was fleshy and warm, but The Dome took the leg and required him to innovate thirty new designs. They said he filed his paperwork late and punished him for creating without their approval, but it was not his fault. That stupid woman put his request in the wrong category.

And our lives changed. One errant request and The Dome began watching him closer than ever. Us closer than ever. Not only does he have listeners in his ears and viewers in his eyes—like all Anomalies—but he also has watchers on his hands monitoring his written messages.

Because of her.

My unease rises with the sun. It gurgles in my chest, growing stronger the closer we get to Marguerite's home. Still, to get this over with, I want to go faster, but I keep this to myself and walk beside her. For my patience, I get chatter. So much chatter. Marguerite does not waste one of her excruciating breaths. She talks on and on about every little thing.

“Rock Toes are the best candy. My dolly does not come apart. How strange. One of my medicines tastes yucky, like a dirty human.”

All things I know.

I sigh. Loquamouths. Bottomless geysers of words that drench all near them.

“Are you afraid of The Wall?” At this question, Marguerite turns to me.

“I have never seen The Wall, so why would I be afraid of it?”

“No, I meant—” One of the wheels on Marguerite’s walker hits a large crack, turns, and she pitches forward. I grab her jacket before she falls and yank her back. She rights herself.

“Many thanks. How much is my paternal worth?” She adjusts her jacket on her shoulders as she looks at me, having forgotten her question about The Wall.

I do not remind her, as I do not know my answer, but instead think on her paternal. “With cancer of the bones and so few birth parts attached. Is his blood sweet or sour?”

Marguerite gasps and crashes down into her walker’s seat. Pulls a tissue from her pocket. Out comes ragged, body-shaking coughs. The jacket’s pressure must have disturbed her lungs. After wiping the sweat from her forehead, she puts the tissue back and taps her thigh. “I do not know. I think sour.”

Hmm. His possible numbers pop up in my head; I tell her none of them. It is not our way, and she deserves more than speculations.

“Hard to say. His worth depends on many factors: markets, Need Maps, blood type, flavor, etc.”

She continues tapping.

I browse the homes around us, the art on the doors. Stunning. No two doors have the same base color. I look into the small windows, but only my faded and distorted reflection is there. Over time, the synthGlass has yellowed and become cloudy.

My hand itches to copy the doors’ designs into my notebooks. Weave them around the eight faces I have drawn there. Meticulously drawn in each new notebook though they bring me pain.

I do not want to forget them.

Chittering and squawking fill the air. synthSquirrels, synthBirds, and other small animals move here and there. We do not need to feed them, but they are pleasant to have, so we pay to keep them installed.

Two young girls gnaw on a tibia until their paternal shouts for them to come inside.

At their age, these children should know better than to advertise their family has ever had a calf of wight.

Ding. 100,000 units each.

They stand, pull the bone back and forth, yelling, and only stop when the bigger girl wrenches it from the smaller and pushes her down. She gets up and shoves her sister back. Raises both arms above her head and lets her wrists go limp.

Echoing screams and overlapping cries ricochet in my head. Raised arms. Limp wrists. They are always in my nightmares.

The older sister raises the bone; her sister raises a fist—and their paternal comes out. He grabs the bone, slaps the older one on her back, and shoves them into their home.

Neither will have the tibia, which is a good thing anyway: They were doing it wrong. The bone must be broken and heated to get to the nutty flavor of the marrow.

The man's worth—his *ding*—fades from my mind. 140,000 units.

“What does my paternal's marrow taste like?” Marguerite taps her thigh harder.

“I do not know. I have not had cancered marrow.”

She looks in the distance. “Will his wight make others ill?”

A boy with straight black hair and diluted ClearJuice-colored skin like the others, runs screaming through their yard. *Ding*. Two-thirds his sisters' worths. He pauses only to kick off his shoes before bolting into their home.

No conceived of mine will behave like these horrid children.

Marguerite pulls at my arm. I look down at her. "Will his wight make others ill?"

"It is extremely unlikely."

"Why?"

All these questions. Does her maternal answer none?

"Cancer is difficult to give to another. Possible but immensely difficult. His wight is good."

She taps the arm of her walker and stands. "It is not good for him!"

"I know, little one, I know."

Inside the home, there is silence—until the children come out carrying a heavy, locked basket filled with clothing, wight, vegetables, and water. Usually, there is a wheeled carrier for this basket, but they are being punished, so they must walk it a mile down the road to the Past-Knowers.

Marguerite sucks in a breath; her face is blank as she thinks hard. The look is familiar, but I do not know why. She coughs. "If it is good wight, why does it only go to the Third and Fourth regions?" She coughs hard again and goes silent.

I let her think on it. She shakes her head and walks in front of me. I smile at her back.

Why is always a grand question.

A moment later, I follow her. More relaxed the more steps I take. I have always enjoyed walking, so I tasked myself with taking Marguerite home. Even now, with my extra weight stressing my back and foot, it is pleasant.

We pass the children, who grunt along. The eldest sister holds the basket on her head. They bow to me as much as possible.

The sisters are too tired to fight anymore, and the brother has been punished for their poor behavior. He says he will fight them later. Do children ever learn the lessons you intend to teach them?

Near the garden is the large, multi-family home of the Past-Knowers: a well-kept, tall building with beautiful art on all doors. Inside lives the 50-aged and older—wise from their experiences. They are the third most important people in our world. All give to them and ensure their health and comfort because they have lived the past.

They can help us not repeat it.

Marguerite's breath wheezes and she pants heavily, but I do not stop. I wait until she holds up a hand. She must define her own limits, not crave for someone to define them for her.

We stop. She settles onto her walker's seat, next to the tall, flat, gray rock I sit on. The same one I sit on every Thurs when I walk her home. I am in peace for a moment as she stares at the bracelet around my wrist. She has always been fascinated with my charms.

“When did you get your eight charms, marm?” Her voice crackles.

“Some recent, some long ago. Most with my previous beloved.” I try to envision his face, his smile, anything about him, but I do not remember what he looks like anymore. Or how he laughed. Or how I felt when I was with him. I only see James of the Pillars.

It is odd to mix old lives with new ones. Old beloveds, old children, old feelings. I am glad our world does not mix anymore. What use is it to revisit a past completed?

I adjust my leg. Sweat has gathered in the prosthetic. “Do not call me ‘marm’ in public. I am Common. ‘Marm’ does not befit Commons.” She smiles at me and nods.

The wind blows, cold despite the rising sun. I pull Marguerite’s hat down to cover her ears, her jacket up to cover her neck. If she catches another illness, she may not live to see the next week.

“What did you feel when you received them?”

“Proud. With these charms, we could survive hard months and long shortages.”

“My maternal has one charm.” She scratches her earlobe. The top half was sold long ago. “She purchased it after my birth and cried after receiving it. She still cries.” Marguerite taps her thigh more. “Will you get a ninth?”

I zip her jacket up further. “I may get another charm, but I have not decided yet.”

“Oh, well, if not, I will be very happy.” She stares off into the distance, her eyes wide and open, her mouth pursed and closed—and pokes my protruding belly button. “Why are you so immense? My maternal was never so.” Poke.

“Stop that, silly.” I grab her hand and rest it on my belly. Place both of mine over hers. Even through her gloves, her fingertips are as cold as the wind during the snowflake season.

The children come upon us again, wiping sweat from their faces. Their flavors are much stronger than most, wafting in the air: one is sweet, another bitter, and the third savory. O positive.

They are talking loudly, playing Okwu. Laughing now. Patiently waiting their turn to speak so they will not lose points.

Marguerite offers a word as she moves toward them, smiling brightly. It is a grand word that would get many points in the game.

The children stop. Stare at her. Harder at her walker. Its arched handles. Its seat in the middle. Its four wheels. They set the basket down. The girls kneel to me, with their hands in their laps and their eyes downcast. Each has only one birth leg.

Gray dresses. Hair styled in the same way: two braids combined at the back to create a heart above their free-flowing back hair. Dangling cowrie shell earrings that end in a dark pink lotus bursting out of a thick circle.

The boy—far shorter than his sisters—uses a stick with flat pieces of wood at both ends to hold the basket. He sets it down and holds himself in a plank position on the ground. Lowers his eyes. His shirt gapes. An old, rectangular keloid scar covers half of his chest and stomach; his skin was harvested long ago.

Sweat rolls down his hair—shaved all around with a shiny bun at the top. His seashell necklace bares the same flower, the same circle that cannot contain it.

They do not move but wait patiently.

It is good to see they have *some* respect for their elders.

“A grand morn.” They rise after my words.

Greet Marguerite next. Each holds their palm an inch from hers. Anomalies touch; we must preserve space.

The younger sister’s lip curls, and the brother narrows his eyes at her gasping breaths.

“I can help you.” Marguerite gestures toward the large basket.

“How, *übel?*” The younger sister’s voice is loud. “You cannot even walk yourself, let alone carry this.”

“Do not call me that.” She looks at the eldest, who looks the most tolerant, and spreads the handles of her walker longer and wider and lowers the seat—smiling hard all the while. “None of us will carry it. You can... put it on the top of my walker and roll it. I will sit in the seat.” She gasps quietly. Cuts it short. “It will work... I, I read this method in a book.”

“It does move smoothly. We shoul—”

“No, brother, come. She is defective and smells like year-old garbage.” The oldest girl fans the air and lifts her hand, palm up. They help her put the basket back on her head and assist her in supporting the weight. All three flash their palms quickly and walk off.

“May you break your legs and be slaked!” Marguerite shoves her walker away. It slams into the side of the rock next to me and tips over.

I have seen a slake. Heard the screams. Piece by piece, the baking takes days.

She stares at the ground as she rights her walker. Sits beside me while brushing rock dust from its metal. Putting the handles back to their usual size. “I did not want to help them with...

that stupid basket, anyway.” She winces at each inhale. “I like being alone.”

I wipe the dust from her fingertips. Push her slumped shoulders back and lift her head. “Being alone is a gift to the strong. Know this.”

I glance around. Hold her palm up. Press mine to hers.

‘And in other news, protests against the infant registry are spreading across our world.’ Faded images show from my device, as it has determined I am sitting. A kaleidoscope of citizens from different regions and continents plays over my vision. Small batches of them with shaved heads, nearly naked bodies, and loud voices. They stomp the ground and hold up signs. Others carry infants with large numbers written on their foreheads, backs, and stomachs.

“Infants should not get barcodes; they should be at least... three-aged.” Marguerite holds up three fingers. “I will protest.”

“That is grand, but I hope one day, you will have no need.”

Marguerite stares at my belly, smiling once more, her eyes Terrain-large. “You are as big as my *tía*... who double conceived.”

“Mm-hmm. In this way, I am an anomaly. Different than others. It is how I was birthed. Most females—even Anomalies or those carrying conceiveds of Anomaly bloodline—do not have such huge bellies.” I pause, rubbing my stomach, reveling in the prestige of my husband. In the possibility I will birth an Anomaly. Maybe... maybe even a six-dot.

I cup her hand again, and she raises a finger on the other.

“Are you going to poke my belly?”

She shakes her head and yet moves her finger closer. *This child. What am I to do with her?* She sets her finger on her thigh. Stands. We continue to her home, strolling along side by side.

“All Anomalies live in Urban. Lucky them.” She gets that faraway joyful look on her face once more.

“Most live there, some in the First regions, others elsewhere. James of the Pillars lives here with me.”

“Will I become an Anomaly?”

“No, you are born of two Commons. But your pitch is a sign you will receive a good life position. In the past, it was rare, and so it remains.”

“James of the Pillars has... Common parents?”

“Yes, he was raised by them, but he was born of two Anomalies. His birth parents perished.”

“Oh, that is sad. Why can I not become an Anomaly?”

Sigh. So many questions.

“You do not carry the Anomaly gene, and your brain will collapse itself rejecting an implanted one.”

“Will your conceived become an Anomaly?”

I shrug. “We must wait until his eighth birth day.”

“How did you meet James of—Are we defective?”

I pause, my breath coming in tiny heaves. It is an excuse. I am thinking of an answer that fights the one drilled into my head. Finally, I say, “Just because you are Common does not mean you were made wrong.”

“Well, I am glad we are Common together. Do we belong here?”

Again, I fight an answer given to me long ago. “I do not know. Valley is the floor, and The Dome has large, dirty feet.”

Marguerite wobbles a little. “I am glad to live on the floor. It means we... are the ceiling of another room.” She leans into my side before holding herself upright. “James of the Pillars is an Anomaly. Why does he live in Valley?”

“My husband lives here because love doomed him.”

She pauses, continues walking. “Why did you doom him?”

We have arrived. I stop where I always do—ten feet to the side of her home—and let her go to the door alone. At the threshold, she turns to me, waiting.

“He begged me to.”

CHAT AND REVIEW

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