

## Neighbors

### Act I

In this haze my pace is so fast I pass by other park goers in record time; I'm gone before they can even get a good look at me. Most of them are like me: walking alone to digest the day, maybe a dog on a leash or venting to a friend over the phone or both. A hoard of cyclists glide past, their wheels buzzing like bee wings, and I wonder what they're trying to distract themselves from. No one takes up hardcore cycling habits unless they're desperately trying to ride away from something.

I know today is different because I never intended it to be this way and my stomach hurts as I bury myself in the humid depths of Central Park. It's after dinner time, the lights of the lamp posts on, and I hope that by some miracle I'll reach into my pocket and pull out my headphones. Instead when I open my hand I see two bent matches, a cigarette, two pennies, and my old high school ID that now serves me no purpose after graduating last month. In my freshman ID picture I was smiling, but in this one my face is flat, my eyes unfocused. My dad had insisted I shave that morning even though I prefer my face with a thin stubble around my jawline. Under "First" it says Lorenzo, and under "Last" it says de Montana.

I light the crooked match on the bottom of my sandal, careful not to burn my fingers, and put it to the end of the cigarette. My dad thinks I only smoke at his work events at Bemelmans Bar on the Upper East Side where other pairs of fathers and sons gather to chat near a grand piano and hold crystal glasses of scotch. I think all the time about how he taught me to hold and smoke a cigar on my fifteenth birthday: "Don't inhale. Just get enough in your cheeks, blow it out slowly, *y ya*. Anything more and it becomes gymnastics." I remember thinking I would practice smoking in secret with cigarettes and become the best damn cigar smoker at that Christmas party.

The constant hum of uneasiness grows the farther I get from home. Here in the belly of Central Park, I've already forgotten which direction I took and how I wound up here. I'm doing my best to walk myself towards sanity, hoping the distance will somehow bring my dad and I closer together after our shouting match over dinner, causing me to stand up and walk out with food still in my mouth. Sandwiched between the feeling of animosity is one of true longing and I would give anything to see him walking towards me in the shadows right now, his favorite cap on his head that I sometimes steal for myself without him knowing. I'd rather be home—of course I'd rather be home—but I don't want to go back until he understands why I'm not there.

Damn I wish I had my headphones.

Walking between each circle of light from the lamp posts becomes so redundant my stomach aches more. I can't remember the last time I was in the Park at this hour by myself. My pace quickens in the dark, which isn't easy after finishing a full cigarette in under a minute. I sucked on it so hard I practically willed my lungs to collapse just so my father would get a phone call from the hospital he works at saying his son was there with collapsed lungs because he drew on a cigarette with such disdain it almost killed him.

It's days like these that make me talk to my twin sister out loud, and one thought makes its round for the hundredth time: *Why the fuck can't you be here?* I've lost count of how many times I cried myself to sleep at night because I can feel her but can't see her. It's a form of torture I've become accustomed to and wouldn't wish on anybody, and I wake up each morning just a little more bitter. Telling her good morning and good night helps, but as I've gotten older

it's become a blatant fact that my family would be so different if we had made it out together. It feels like my life forked into two paths and I'm on the path without my sister, and somewhere out there is a version of us where all I have to do is walk into the next room where she'll be lounging on the couch, expecting me...

I haven't slowed my pace in over an hour and I'm scuffing my sandals against the pavement so roughly I'm sure they'll rip off my feet at any moment; they're flimsy and were not made for times like this. They should come with a warning on the tag: *Not intended for moments of crisis. Please remove and use real shoes as recommended.*

That's when I see her: She's sprinting towards me from the opposite direction, missing the rings of light from the lamp posts so I can't quite make out her features. She's breathing hard, causing so much disruption to my thoughts I forget to ignore her and instead give her my full attention. She passes under a ring of light for a second and I see she's not only running, but crying as well.

*Holy shit, it's you.* I would recognize those delicate Japanese features anywhere. *What are you doing here?* This girl and her family just moved across the hall from me directly from Japan. I walked by a small mountain of moving boxes stamped to death with Japanese postage in the lobby. I can also hear them speaking every time they open their door, their voices clear as day.

I slow down to a heavy stroll. She wipes her face with her sleeve as she flies past me, moving the air.

I look over my shoulder. She's headed for the Central Park Zoo. If it were any other night I would have forgotten her the moment she passed, shrugged it off as a few seconds of radio interference and nothing more. But tonight, I can't help but feel as if she's taken my hand and is pulling me with her. Or maybe I just see an opportunity to distract myself from my thoughts and take it.

Once the decision is made, I quickly take both sandals in my hands, my soles braving direct pavement, and then turn around and pick up my feet, faster and faster so I don't lose her, wondering if my lungs really will collapse.

I'm right: today is different.

I keep my distance as she closes in on the zoo's glass aviary. Its lights are on, creating the only well-lit area in the park. She's right up to the glass and I can see her clearly now. Her jaw is clenched tight as she looks in. The aviary is crowded with lavish trees and foliage, a man made pond with a waterfall, and a web of stoops and swings for the birds to perch on. I must have passed by this aviary a hundred times as a kid and I still can't remember the name of a single exotic bird in there. I circle around so we're on opposite sides, still keeping my distance.

The door inside opens and a man in uniform enters the aviary. He has on thick rubber gloves and an apron as he walks towards the middle, and that's when I see it: a green bird only slightly smaller than a peacock is lying in the grass, its wings fanned out at its sides and eyes closed. My heart beat shifts deeper into my chest and I stand very still as I watch him bend down and gently, respectfully handle the bird to remove it. There's blood on its neck and on the grass.

The girl starts speaking—no praying—in Japanese. I would say I don't understand a word of it, but that would be a lie, because as soon as her anguished voice hits my ears I understand: This bird meant a great deal to her.

The man and the bird disappear through the door, her prayers unacknowledged by him. I step up to the glass and raise my hand to it. I don't know why it feels okay for me to make myself known in that moment; it just does.

Her prayers stop and when I look at her, her eyes are already squared up to mine. We haven't spoken at all since becoming new neighbors. I've never in my entire life interacted with a neighbor outside the building where I live.

My hand is still raised to the glass, so I drum my fingers across it, saying hey.

She blinks and it occurs to me I have no idea if she recognizes me from the handful of times we've passed each other. Before I can make another noise on the glass she drops her head and makes her way over to me, her feet slow and heavy from running as she rounds the dome. Her sweater is hanging off her shoulders, clinging to her elbows and almost touching the ground. I can't tell if she's upset, embarrassed, or relieved.

She stops in front of me and pops the sweater up onto her shoulders, then zips it up to her neck. It startles me how well crying suits her. "You live in my building," is the first thing she says to me.

English. No accent.

"Yeah. Sorry, I saw you running by and I just... Are you...?"

"Yeah, why?"

"Nothing, you just seemed...sad."

"I cry all the time," she sniffs, her skin hot. "Literally."

I don't know why that's funny to me, but I smile. "How do you know that bird?"

"It's a Kiji. Green pheasant. They're sacred in Japanese culture."

"Sorry." And I mean it. "It did look pretty sacred."

"Whatever happened he probably started it. They're not the friendliest birds ever. I still don't get why they put him in there with a hundred other birds. Stupid zoo."

As she talks, I spot a gray bird perched on a stoop above our heads. Its feathers are ruffled, some bent out of place, and a few white patches of skin show through its face where it was pecked at, leaving it scarred. I realize this is the Kiji's surviving opponent.

"I'm Keiko." She crosses her arms over her chest.

"Lorenzo. Lori."

She gives me a little bow with her head and I smile again.

There's a pause.

"I should go back," she sighs. "I ran out on my family in the middle of dinner when I heard."

"So did I."

"You did what?"

"Ran out in the middle of dinner. There was chicken in my mouth and everything. Yeah..."

She starts to leave but stops, her hair smooth and straight as knives. She takes a quick moment to look me up and down, then asks, "Wanna come?"

"Where?"

"Home. My dad made ribs. You can meet everyone."

Well, I can't say no to home, especially one that's not mine.

## Act II

There's not much food left when I enter Keiko's apartment, as her aunt and uncle are visiting and also eating dinner, but they put together what they have and make me a plate. Her family speaks little English, but they try their best as they motion for me to join them without question.

I pick up a dumpling and stuff the whole thing in my mouth. "How do you speak English so well if you guys just moved here?"

"I went to an international school, which means, preschool through high school, all classes are taught in English."

Before I can respond, the uncle speaks for the first time.

"He wants to know if you'll give him permission to Read you," Keiko translates.

"Normally I would tell him to leave you alone, but he's not listening to me."

"Read to me or read *me*?"

"Read you."

"How does that work?"

"I've never quite figured it out, but it's kind of his hobby and he's pretty good at it. It only takes a minute."

I nod my head yes and shrug, feeling somewhat obligated.

Her uncle stands and comes over to sit in front of me, our knees almost touching. Keiko's mother and father adjust themselves for a better view as if their favorite show is about to start and they need to get comfortable. Her uncle leans forward, his nose two inches from mine, and I resist the impulse to lean away.

"What do I do?" I ask Keiko.

"No talking," she says.

I sit still now that I'm the subject of the uncle's focus. I can see my reflection in his glasses and get whiffs of his breath, which smells like coffee. I'm not sure what to do with my face as his eyes move over it.

Finally he sits back and speaks while looking at me, and I can tell by his tone he's explaining something important while holding up three fingers.

"He says...he says he was looking for a third person when you and I came in," Keiko translates.

"What'd you mean? Oh, like someone else with us?"

"Yes, that he felt the presence of three people." Keiko's face is solemn, returning more and more to the state I found her in, her mouth turned downward.

"Okay..." I'm having a hard time leveling with them. "So...now what?"

He says something to me.

"Tell him about your family."

"Okay. I live with my dad across the hall. He's an ER nurse. He was working towards becoming a doctor but hasn't had the time. Not yet, anyway... My mom left when I was one so my dad had to raise me. That was...hard. For him. Both of us, I guess."

After Keiko translates, her family makes a universal sound of understanding and her mother whispers something.

He's reading my face again, more quickly this time.

"Do you have any siblings?" Keiko asks.

I open my mouth to say the words, but nothing comes. Her question rolls around in my head, loud and inescapable. I can't decide between yes or no. A long moment passes and still I can't seem to form a sentence into the shape I want, so I sit back, hunched over, and turn to Keiko. "A third person, huh?" I ask.

She nods

Her uncle nods and asks another question.

“Is the sibling your sister?” Keiko asks.

“Yes.”

“Older or younger?”

“Twin.”

“Oh...” I can tell by her reaction she may have put the pieces together earlier, as her uncle kept insinuating, but asking me to clarify doesn’t make it any easier.

“Technically.”

Suddenly I’m remembering sitting in science class, wanting to share my own somewhat scientific-related experience with everyone, and announcing loudly, *I had a twin sister but she died when she was born*, as if I said I found a five dollar bill but then I lost it, declaring my victory over hers the same way the teacher described the balance of nature in a habitat. It could have been either one of us, but I made it. I’m here and she’s not.

Keiko is asked what I said and she translates, her head bowed. I understand what she’s saying.

Her uncle begins expertly describing something to me, his body language becoming more lively. I feel myself wanting to listen and take in the thought and care he’s giving me.

“He said there’s an old Japanese saying that when one twin dies and the other lives, your spirits become neighbors, and this can make things very difficult for both. There is a thin wall separating the two of you, just like the walls between neighbors who have never met but know the other is always there. She’s still clinging to you and your father, causing this feeling that something is always off or missing. It may not be obvious, but it’s there.”

“It’s obvious to me,” I say without hesitation. “Whoa...” I fall back in my chair, as if snapping out of a dream for a moment, realizing what I’ve just said. “Yeah, it’s definitely obvious to me.”

“Do you speak to her?”

“Yes,” I respond, unblinking. I don’t know why, but I feel I need to tell these people everything. Answering their questions feels like water pouring out of me little by little, water that has been sitting stagnant in me for too long. “Sometimes I have dreams where I lose her all over again. Like at first everything is normal, as if she’s been here with me all along, and then something happens and I can’t save her and I wake up feeling like I was so close... I was so close to finally saving her...”

Keiko’s eyes widen. “Wow. She really does have you wrapped around her finger.” My brows furrow. I’ve never heard someone casually refer to my dead sister as having her own thoughts and motivations. The next thing I think of is my mom. “It was too hard for her, and I get it. She had a baby shower where all the gifts were twin-related, all pink and blue stuff. Two cribs, two sets of blankets, two car seats, a double stroller, two sets of shoes, matching outfits—all of it. And then my first birthday came around... She made one birthday cake, which she knew should have been two, and the next day she was gone... I guess making the one birthday cake just...did something to her.”

Keiko does her best to translate for me, wiping away tears before they fall.

“Hey.” I reach over and place my hand on her arm, feeling at fault.

“Sorry,” she sniffs. “It’s just so sad.”

Her mother hands her a napkin.

“Yeah,” I nod, “it is sad.” I turn to her uncle and ask, “So how do I get rid of her?”

There is an ancient Japanese ritual called Tebanasu, Keiko explains to me, specifically for saying goodbye to needy, lingering spirits. The more difficult the spirit, the more complex the event. Her uncle explains that there is only a small window of time in your life when you are able to rid yourself of a lingering spirit, and that window would become smaller and smaller as I grow older. He suggests the ritual be done sooner rather than later, and since I'm already here, it shouldn't take long.

"What's her name?" Keiko asks me.

Her family is quickly clearing the table of dishes while her uncle is on his knees in a nearby closet gathering everything we need.

"She doesn't have one."

Her eyes widen. "Doesn't have one? Wait, how do you address her when you speak to her?"

"Nothing," I shrug. "Maybe Sis or *hermana* on occasion, but otherwise nothing. Besides, she knows when I'm talking to her."

"You're kidding." She seems genuinely stunned.

"I'm not entirely sure why my parents never wrote in a name for her. Maybe they thought not naming her would make it easier? That's the only thing I can think of."

"I guess...in a sense...but still."

I sigh at her. "Please don't cry."

She raises her arm and swings at my shoulder, but I dodge it and we snicker, trying not to laugh too loud.

Her uncle emerges from the closet. Draped over his arm is a thick satin robe and in his hand is a delicate gold dish. Keiko tells him what I've just told her, and he slaps a small, blank paper on my chest, then holds open the robe for me. I slip my arms through the sleeves and tie the tassels at the waist. He disappears again in silence.

"You have to name her," Keiko tells me.

"I have to name her?" I ask, holding up the paper rectangle. "Am I supposed to write her name on this?"

"Yes. Her name goes there. We need a name." She hands me a black pen. "Any name, just name her."

"Okay, okay, I need to think... Jesus this is hard." Keiko leaves me as I sit down in a nearby armchair and stare at the blank scrap of paper, pen at the ready. In all my eighteen years I have never had the courage to ask my dad what he would have named my sister because even the mention of her causes the walls to shake. It's almost like he could feel me gathering the audacity to ask, and then he would say or do something to steer me off course entirely, and we're back to square one.

My mother's middle name flashes on the inside of my eyelids: Mara. I write it down before I change my mind. There's no time left anyway.

"Come now," her uncle says.

He ushers me to the center of the living room where he has situated a bamboo mat on the floor, presumably for me to sit on. In front of the mat is a small square mirror placed behind the gold dish, which he places the paper inside. I stand barefoot on the mat awaiting instruction. He reaches down and pats his knees and I do as I'm told, wondering exactly how much time these people spend sitting on their ankles.

"What am I doing?" I ask Keiko.

“Don’t worry, we’ll do the praying. All you have to do is bow, but we have to light the paper on fire first. We have to burn her name and keep praying until the flame is out. It may take a few minutes.”

“Minutes? It’s a three-inch piece of paper.”

She eyes me as if I don’t know what I’m talking about. “You’ll see.” She looks at the paper and then back to me. “Mara?”

“My mom’s middle name.”

Her uncle holds out to me a small shot glass of steaming clear liquid. “Drink.”

“What is it?”

“*Shochu*,” he says.

“It’s better to be relaxed so the spirit can’t sense any doubt about whether or not you want them gone,” Keiko explains as she ties her hair back. “Twins are especially difficult to separate because they’re so fused together. Careful, it’s hot.”

“*Kanpai!*”

I look up and see her uncle has a shot glass of his own. We clink glasses and flip them upside down on our open mouths.

Done.

I exhale, feeling my breath hot as it warms my ears and stomach. The warmth seeps into my muscles and my back and neck slacken.

“Good?” He asks.

I nod multiple times. “Yeah.”

He turns, claps his hands once and announces to everyone, “*Kore o yaro!*”

I can’t help but smirk; I’m sure he just said something along the lines of “let’s do this shit!”

### Act III

*Cover the mirrors.*

*Cover the lamps.*

*Lock the doors.*

*And cancel your plans.*

Keiko’s family sits on the floor around the mat, her uncle closest to me. He lights a match and drops it in the dish with the paper. I bend forward, all the way down, my arms outstretched like two reaching tree branches and ears pressed between my shoulders. I instantly notice my breath is strained, and it’s only been a few seconds.

They start to pray, and I notice the shot glass has done a good job of keeping my mind from distracting itself. Sitting there, folded over in a way my body has never folded before, I had nothing to do but focus, listen, breathe...

The fire must be out any second now. I lift my head to peek at what’s happening in the gold dish, and the fire is still there as if we’d just lit it. *What?* There was hardly any paper to begin with; How could it possibly burn for more than sixty seconds?

I start to sit up, becoming a bit concerned, but her uncle reaches forward and pushes me down firmly. I land on my elbows and stay there, taking deep breaths. *No exceptions for first timers.*

I keep an eye on the flame as it flickers angrily in the dish, unchanging. It’s been at least two minutes by now.

Her uncle speaks, breaking the prayer.

“You need to talk to her,” Keiko tells me. “She’s stubborn. She’s not going to leave unless you tell her to.”

I slump to one side, my head resting on my arm and eyes closing. The shochu—and lack of oxygen—has gone to my head. “It’s okay, though. It’s okay with me...”

Keiko tells her uncle. He slides himself up to me on his knees and lifts me up by the shoulders. I fill my lungs with as much air as they’ll hold. In one swift motion, he reaches into his pocket, takes out what looks like a gold Zippo-style lighter, snaps open the top and holds it under my nose. My head drops backwards against his arm and I fall into darkness.

When I open my eyes I’m laying flat on my back against the mat. The warm, golden light I felt when I walked into Keiko’s apartment is slightly diminished. Her family is gone. All that’s left is the flame burning furiously in front of the mirror on the floor.

I get up, feeling the first stages of panic, desperately trying to orient myself. Everything looks the same but feels entirely different.

A voice I’m sure I’ve heard in my dreams comes from the living room: “I’m kind of shocked. That *brujeria* shit actually worked.”

Mara is lounging on the couch, her ankles crossed. She’s wearing the same clothes as me, even the satin robe. Her face is my face, with only slight differences, and her hair is a wild and curly chaos, just like Mom’s. We even have the same freckles across our foreheads.

I had always imagined that if I ever found her in front of me like this that I would, without a doubt, lock my arms around her, never letting go, or fall to my knees and squeeze both her legs, my face pressed against her hips. My belief was always, *If only she were here, everything would be okay*. But now that she is here, all I feel is a polarizing push and pull.

“It’s you,” I mumble, the longing side of me escaping.

“That’s the thing I hate. You act like there are times when I’m not with you, only talking to me when you feel like it or when it’s convenient for you, but really, I’m with you *all the time*, *Lo-ri*.” She sits up and leans forward on her elbows. “Sometimes I see you doubt yourself and it pisses me off.”

I tell her sorry, or at least I think it.

“I heard what you said to her uncle.” She stands and steps up to me. “It’s not my fault the reading man found me. You tend to keep me at the forefront at all times.”

I notice a scar on her left eyebrow, the same one I got after I was hit by a baseball in eighth grade, causing a skip in the hairs. “Wait, why do *you* have that scar?”

“Whatever happens to you, happens to me. Everything you experience, I experience. You know how it is. I feel, you feel, we all feel together, blah blah blah... Stupid baseball.” Stupid baseball is right.

“That reminds me. Why does Dad do that?” I watch as she picks up a bowl of nuts from the coffee table and starts eating them. Some miss her mouth and drop to the floor.

“Do what?” It’s crazy how her voice is exactly as I imagined it.

“Act like he doesn’t talk to me just as much as you do.”

“I don’t know,” I say, a smirk appearing on my face, and then hers. “I mean I know he speaks to you, I just didn’t know he did it as much as me.”

“Yeah, man. You both spend so much time talking to me, dreaming about me, talking to me in your dreams! I may be dead, but you’re both addicted to my life. That shit is like crack. It’s cute to watch.” She smiles, turning on her heel to amble around the living room and look out the window as if she’s waiting to see something outside.



I'm not even sure what to say to this. As she stares out, I wonder if anyone can see her when they look up—then I realize of course not. All they see is an empty window.

"I heard what you and Dad said over dinner, too," she adds.

"Which part?"

"Every word. He said Don Herring is coming over with his boys for dinner this weekend, and then you asked if you had to be there for that because you don't like the Herrings, and he started to say that maybe if you stopped talking to your dead sister all the time but you cut him off and—

"I said you talk to her just as much as I do, so it's not just me. And he goes, 'What'd you mean?' And I say, 'I hear you talking to her all the time. I heard you while you were looking for the frying pan, asking her where it was. And again when you couldn't find the oil. And again when you tasted it and said it was good and he said, 'That was not speaking to her.' But I could tell by his face... He just looked so fucking pissed that I caught him."

"He did look really fucking pissed," she laughs, a smile across her face that reminds me of my own, and without warning, the air catches in my throat, making it impossible to look right at her.

Hearing our laughter overlap is so devastating that it fills my ears and stops my heart. I lift the neck of my shirt and press it to my face as I break down, my eyes shut tight and my face wet. I realize I was never wrong about her; she's been here the whole time. We've been here the whole time.

Mara takes the sleeve of her robe and tries to gently wipe my cheeks. "I know...", she sighs apologetically.

I wipe the palm of my hand down my face and try to catch my breath, feeling disoriented all over again. Whatever this is, it's a lot. I've been dreaming of it for as long as I can remember, but nothing could have prepared me.

"Come on."

She gently nudges me to the end of the couch, and we sit at opposite ends, facing each other. After a moment I reach over, place my hand over her fist and hold it. She stares off as if deep in thought, unresponsive. I take a breath and suddenly my hand is squeezing hers, my fingers digging into her skin, unrelenting.

"Lori!" Mara jerks her hand back, her eyes wide.

"Look at me!"

"*What?*"

I reach behind for a pillow and chuck it at her, then get on my feet with both hands clasped on my head, slowly pacing the living room in circles. "I feel insane right now. Do you know how insane this is?" My breaths come in forcefully, filling the entirety of my top half not unlike a spastic vacuum. I turn to her, my arms falling at my sides. "*Why are you so calm?*"

"I'm not calm!"

"Yes you are!"

"Well, neither of us are going anywhere until you tell me to leave you. I'm just waiting for you to say it... Or..."

I stop pacing. "Or?"

"I know what we need right now." She gets up and stands purposefully in front of me, her feet planted. Her hands clap once. "Come on. What's the one thing you want to do with me right now?"

"I can't think."

“You’re not going to be here for much longer so come on. Hurry up, Lori! You know you want to do it, just *go!*” She claps her hands twice and charges at me, shoving my chest as hard as she can. I stumbled backwards, my heels shaking the floor, and I catch myself on the armchair

“Sorry, was that too—?”

I shove her shoulders and she stumbles backwards, knocking into the wall behind her and sliding to the floor. I go to her, saying, “I’m so sorry, I didn’t mean to—

Her foot swings out and hits the side of my face and I’m knocked onto my elbows. She scrambles to her feet and sprints down the hall. I follow close behind, wanting to even the score so badly my hand swipes at her back, missing her, and she shrieks. “Damn you’re fast!” A gust of wind hits us as we speed through the doorway of the empty master bedroom. Mara leaps and rolls onto the bed, popping up on her knees and smiling. She swings a large pillow at my head and I grab it from her and fling it over my shoulder. I swat away the snow of tiny feathers, saying, “No pillows.” We’re both on our knees on the white comforter, fists up. “How hard are we hitting? We’re not doing any real damage...”

“No real damage.”

“This is insane.”

“Will you stop saying that?”

“Sorry.”

“Shut up and hit me.”

We stand face to face. We’re back on the mat in front of Mara’s burning name, the satin robes now just loose piles on the floor in the hallway. We take the bottom hems of our shirts and wipe the blood around our noses and mouths, our hair and clothes frayed to no end. My skin still stings red from the impact of her hands and feet and elbows.

“You were right, by the way,” she says, her voice coarse. “My name is Mara.”

“Yeah, I gave it to you.”

She shakes her head. “No. Mom gave it to me, she just never told anyone.”

“Wait, are you serious? Why haven’t I known this whole time?”

“I may have helped you get there, but you picked it for a reason. It’s the only one that felt right, remember?”

“I’m going to miss this.” I say fondly, licking the row of knuckles on my right hand and blowing air on them.

“Hm?”

“Talking with you. Fighting you. Learning about you. Learning what we are.”

“We’re bloody, Lori, that’s what we are.”

I snicker even though my jaw and cheeks hurt. After a moment I say, “We won’t be neighbors anymore, like Keiko’s uncle said...”

She shakes her head. “Nope. What does that make us then I wonder?”

I scrunch my brows in thought. “I wouldn’t worry about it too much.”

“We’re astronauts at different space stations. I’ll be the Moon, you can be Earth.”

“No.”

“What about the North and South Poles?”

“Stop.”

“How about—?”

“Mara.” I put my hand up. We’ve come this far; I wasn’t about to let her change my mind.

She sways on her feet a little, as if me stopping her throws her off balance. “Okay...” she nods. “Question. Are you still going to tell me good morning and good night?”

I let out a deep sigh at the thought of it, unsure. “Maybe not?”

She sways again, then puts her head on my shoulder to keep the room from spinning.

“Well, do me a favor.” Her pinky hooks around my thumb. “Tell me one last time.”

I stare diligently at the flame over her shoulder. It’s significantly smaller than when I first arrived in her world. “Don’t move,” I mutter. I swear I feel a wet patch form on my shoulder from her eyes. The flame turns a shade of ice blue, retreating into itself. It’s almost completely gone.

“Goodnight, Mara.”

