

TASTING LIGHT

TEN SCIENCE FICTION
STORIES TO REWIRE
YOUR PERCEPTIONS

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“So.” Cadence takes a sip from their hot chocolate, licks the froth off their upper lip. “Your name’s Aaliyah?”

“Yeah, I—yeah,” Aaliyah manages. She feels tears threatening again. *God.*

Cadence hesitates. “And you and Reina were . . .”

“Friends.” And almost, *almost* something else. Aaliyah abruptly takes a long swallow of her coffee, letting it scald her throat.

“I’ve never had many friends,” Cadence admits. “My brother, I guess. He looks out for me sometimes. I don’t know what I’d do if something happened to him.” Cadence hesitates again, considering their drink, prodding the bloated marshmallows with a spoon. Then: “Can I ask how—”

“It was a car accident,” Aaliyah explains, and then words start pouring out, as burning and painful as the coffee had been pouring in. But it’s better this way, better to get it over with. “Eight months ago. We went to this concert together—she loved music, she loved singing—and after she dropped me off at my house, it started raining. Hard. There was this . . . flash flood. Reina never made it home. I couldn’t believe it. I still can’t. I keep waiting for her to come back. And now”—Aaliyah looks at Cadence—“here you are.”

“Wow, that’s . . . wow,” Cadence murmurs. They swallow, their throat bobbing. They seem to be struggling with whatever words are caught there. “Aaliyah, I am so sorry, but . . . I . . . I’m not her. You know that, right?”

Aaliyah nods, unable to speak. The tears are spilling now, and she lets them. Cadence reaches across to take her hand

between theirs, their fingers rough with calluses but their touch gentle.

“I . . . I don’t think I should even know too much about her,” Cadence continues. “These past few weeks, this mod . . . this is the first time in my life I’ve ever actually started to feel like *myself*. You know? And I don’t want to lose that. I don’t want to think of this voice as someone else’s.”

But it is, Aaliyah screams inside her skull.

But it isn’t. This tentative touch is not Reina’s, these soft, soulful eyes are not Reina’s, and this voice is not Reina’s, either, not anymore. It only sounds like her.

Cadence must see the grief breaking across Aaliyah’s face, because they withdraw their hands and dig the heels of their palms into their eye sockets in exhaustion.

“Fuck,” they mutter. “I’m sorry. This was a bad idea.”

“No,” Aaliyah says quickly, desperately. “Please, don’t go. *I’m* sorry. I’m not—I’m having a hard time today. But it’s not your fault. Reina would’ve loved knowing a part of her helped you. I . . . I want to see you again.”

“You want to see *me*, or you want to hear *her*?” Cadence asks shrewdly.

Both—why can’t it be both?

“I don’t know anyone here,” Aaliyah says instead, avoiding the question. “My parents shipped me out to this hellhole to get away from it all, but now I’m just . . . surrounded by strangers. I’m the only Black kid in most of my classes. I’m the wrong kind of queer. You’re the first person I’ve met who I could actually see myself—” Aaliyah does not know why she

is saying all this, why she is admitting all this. It is because of Reina's voice, yes, but it is also because of Cadence, their gentleness, their patience. Her throat seizes. "I need a *friend*, Cadence. I don't have a *friend* anymore."

Cadence does not flinch away from her vulnerability. They lean into it, offering up their napkins to wipe away her tears.

"I could use a friend, too," they say softly. "But are you sure that wouldn't just . . . make things harder? For both of us?"

"We can take it a day at a time," Aaliyah says. That is all she can handle anyway. She is not ready to look any further than that, does not want to plan for a future that could be stolen away at any moment.

Cadence seems reassured by this. They even smile for the first time that afternoon, the white of their teeth showing, bright as the snow.

"One day at a time," they agree.

"It used to be nobody could get you to talk. Now you don't shut up," Cadence's brother complains. Cadence has just come out of the shower, wrapped up in a threadbare gray towel, emerging from the steam like a rock star bursting onstage through a cloud of fog. They have been singing at the top of their lungs for the better part of half an hour.

"You're just jealous I sound like Beyoncé now," Cadence says.

Their brother does not know how to respond to this. He is the speechless one these days. "That mod has gone to your

head," he mumbles finally, and he pushes his way into the bathroom.

Cadence's brother is right: this mod *has* gone to their head. It has been six months—it is April—and their new voice, which was stiff and sore for weeks, is finally broken in. They can use it freely, without fear of injuring themselves, or feeling self-conscious, or making their mother cry. They sing all the time. At first, it was just to test the limits of their mod, but now it is for the joy of it.

Cadence does wonder, sometimes, if that joy is their own or if it's only part of their new programming. They wonder this about a lot of things. They laugh more now. They speak up. They are confident. Maybe this is all the work of some phantom in the machine—but then, maybe, this is just how everyone feels when they are finally themselves.

Cadence is not sure anymore that it matters. Aaliyah has started saying that no one is only themselves, that everyone is actually a collage: of the people who raised them, of the people they call their friends, of the poets they read and the singers they listen to. No one is ever really gone, Aaliyah insists. They live on in the component pieces. Cadence is grateful for the color Reina has added to their canvas. She has brought the whole picture into focus. They are not less themselves for her gift, but more.

Cadence finishes getting ready for Sunday dinner, jumping into their slim jeans, climbing into their best black hoodie, sliding their feet into their checkered Vans. Aaliyah is coming over, as she has every Sunday night since Christmas.

Even though it has become routine, Cadence still feels a thrill every time.

And this, too, is their own.

“You going to get in here and help me set the table?” Cadence’s mother scolds as they jump down the stairs two at a time.

“In a minute!” Cadence promises, because right then, the doorbell rings, Aaliyah is here, and Cadence has always been the one to let her in.

“Admit it. You had fun.”

Aaliyah will admit no such thing. Her ears are still ringing from the concert, her throat still sore from roaring with the crowd, but it was a country music concert, and she has a reputation to maintain.

“It was an experience,” Aaliyah says.

“‘An experience,’ okay. I heard you singing along,” Reina says slyly, crossing her arms and leaning back against the hood of the car. The night is black around them, and they are huddled on a little island of yellow-brown light filtering down from the streetlight at the end of Aaliyah’s driveway. Aaliyah is already later than she said she’d be, and she knows her parents are inside worrying, but she still doesn’t want the night to end, not yet.

“Well, I couldn’t just leave you hanging,” she says.

“You love me that much?”

It is a joke—Reina is smirking—but Aaliyah feels it in her chest: she does love her that much, loves her more than she ever intended to, loves her more than she thinks she can bear. There is a question on her lips, one she has bitten back for she

doesn’t know how many years. But something about the way Reina looks tonight, the halo of light around her, the shine of her brown skin, has loosened Aaliyah’s tongue.

“Reina,” she says. “What if I told you that I do love you? Would that . . . would that be okay?”

Reina smiles beautifully at her. She steps forward, closing the distance between them, pulling Aaliyah to her.

The sky breaks open. Rain falls in a spray of bullets, hard and fast. It is one of those sudden spring storms, the kind that come out of nowhere. Reina laughs, water pouring down her face, and presses her forehead to Aaliyah’s.

“Ask me again tomorrow,” she says, and she lets Aaliyah go.

ON THE TIP OF
MY TONGUEWILLIAM
ALEXANDER

I was out for a walk, inspecting tethers and tinkering with small repairs, when Bex called to tell me about you.

“Busy?” Bex asked.

“Yes,” I said.

“How busy?”

“A whole entire neighborhood is about to break loose and float away.”

“Oh,” Bex said. “Which one?”

“Cortado.”

“I don’t know anyone who lives there. Maybe just let it go?”

“Can’t,” I said. “They brew the best coffee in Cortado.

Tía Cassie would eat my eyeballs if she found out that I could’ve saved the place and didn’t bother.”

“Your tía also told you to stop secretly fixing things,” Bex pointed out. “Are you out walking alone right now?”

“Shush.” I coaxed carbon filaments into braiding themselves back together. “Trying to concentrate here.”

“Fine,” Bex said. “Hurry, though. I need your help.”

I didn’t hurry. Filament braids can be fickle. “What’s the problem?”

“My cousin gets here soon, from Earth, and then leaves again for a fancy lunar internship. I need you to play host during the layover.”

“Why can’t you welcome your own cousin to town?” I asked.

“Because,” Bex said, “I’m stuck in quarantine.”

“What?” I stopped braiding to pay actual attention.

“Took a shift at the docks after school. One of the crates broke. It was supposed to be full of frozen ocean from Europa, except it wasn’t really frozen, and it splashed all over me. Now I get to stay in my own little isolation cabin until the doctors are sure I haven’t contracted some kind of exciting European fish flu.”

“Okay,” I said. “That’s genuinely scary.”

“I’m aware,” said Bex. “If I mutate into a shark monster, I will probably hunt you down. First I need you to look after my cousin, though.”

“Sure,” I said. “Text me the details.”

“Thanks. I owe you. I’ll try not to eat you if I turn into a shark.”

Bex’s projected face disappeared from inside my helmet visor. Your contact info and shuttle number popped up instead. I didn’t have much time before your arrival—just enough to hurry home, climb out of my suit, and meet you at the gates.

I wrapped a temporary patch around Cortado’s frayed moorings before I clomped across my hometown’s outer hull.

Picture a giant octopus floating between Earth and Luna. The octopus is amusing itself by playing with dozens of yo-yos and simultaneously juggling batons.

This is where I live. Every yo-yo on its tether is a separate spinning neighborhood—or a lone building, or an abandoned ship that docked here more than a hundred years ago and never left. Every baton is a mobile bridge connecting separate places to make them all one place, one city.

Welcome to Eleum.

My family has our own airlock adjacent to Tía Cassie’s workshop, because inspecting tethers is her actual job. I’m just an unpaid apprentice / intern / familial source of free labor.

Tía was in the workshop, working late as always, so I told her about the Band-Aid I’d just wrapped around Cortado’s tether. She looked up and glared to remind me that I shouldn’t ever spacewalk by myself. The festive, sparkly purple pair of eyes she’d picked out for the day made that glare even more unsettling.

Tía’s original eyes had been damaged by accidental exposure to vacuum—and by “damaged,” I mean they exploded. She’d made new ones out of glass and tiny cameras, which sent signals to a fine mesh she wore over her tongue. Tongues are sensitive. They’re good at making sense of complicated signals. The visual bits of her brain had remapped themselves to interpret patterns of electricity crackling across that tongue mesh.

In other words, my auntie taught herself how to taste light.

I loved that about her.

The two of us agreed to properly fix the frayed tether, and soon. Both of us knew that the list of things to fix was very long, though. Innumerable pieces of the city were held together via “temporary” measures. I tried not to think about it too much. Survival always insists that we trust a whole bunch of inherently untrustworthy things.

I made it to the arrival gates in time because I knew all the shortcuts, which meant that I had to run, jump, and glide through varying levels of gravity in rapid succession. That was nausea-inducing, especially when I rushed across Jemisin Bridge, where everyone is supposed to buckle up and tether themselves to the walls between stops. Luckily, I’d forgotten to eat for most of the day, so I didn’t have any lunch to lose. That lack of lunch did make me feel light-headed and a little dizzy, though.

Bex didn’t warn me that you’re gorgeous, which I also found disorienting.

“Hi.”

“Hi.”

“Welcome to Eleum.”

“Thanks.”

“Hungry?”

“Starved.”

“Okay, I know where we should go first. How long is your layover?”

“Seven hours.” You tried not to yawn and sort of squeak-yawned instead. It was unspeakably adorable. “What time is it here?”

“Depends on the neighborhood,” I said. “Do you need a place to crash after we eat?”

“No,” you insisted. “I need to stay awake. If I don’t acclimate to the time they keep at L2, then the lag will be horrible, and right now it’s morning over there. Bex promised to keep me caffeinated.”

“Then you’re lucky I’m here instead. Bex drinks diet soda all day long.”

You made an appropriately skeptical face. “Coffee?”

I nodded. “Follow me.”

We took the long way to Cortado so we could sample the best bridge food and avoid the more drastic gravity shifts between neighborhoods. Quality street vendors always set up shop on low-speed bridges, with the single exception of the Neci Bridge. Don’t ever eat on the Neci. Don’t even *cross* the Neci if you can possibly avoid it. Just wait at the bridge stop for the next one to come around.

You paused to stare through every window on our way.

“This place is bonkers.”

“True.”

“How does it even hold together?”

“Don’t ask, or it might fly apart.”

“Isn’t it already flying apart? Those bridges look like trapeze artists. They grab hold of one station—”

“Neighborhood,” I said.

“Neighborhood, then let go to spin around and catch another. Weird to think that we’re on a bridge right now while that’s happening.” You took a bite of spicy elote and got bits of squishy corn stuck in your teeth. “Where did the name Eleum come from? Is it Spanish?”

“Portuguese,” I said. “Sort of. It isn’t a word—just a letter and a number stuck together. Ele-um. L1. Lagrange Point One.”

“Aha,” you said. “The first of five magic spots where the gravity wells of the moon and the planet call a truce and cancel each other out. Almost.”

“Exactly.” I couldn’t decide whether or not to tell you about the corn in your teeth. “Wait. What do you mean by ‘almost’?”

“L1 points aren’t very stable,” you said, explaining my own home to me. “They wobble more than L4s or L5s. Those would have been better spots to build a great big space city.”

I got a little defensive, even though I’d just joked about this whole place flying apart—and even though I was one of the few people who knew how many Band-Aids kept that from happening. “Nobody planned to build this great big space city. Eleum just grew. A little refueling station turned into a fuel refinery for all the lunar ice, and then a shipyard, and then it needed a town to house everyone who worked long shifts at the yards and the docks. New craft took off. Old craft came to rest and stayed. Everything kludged together, like rocks and dust collecting to grow a whole new planet—or

like old planetside cities that sprang up wherever river met ocean. All of that happened *here*. It couldn't have happened anywhere else. I don't care how stable L5 thinks it is."

"Okay, grumpyface." You took another bite, which made the tooth situation worse. "I like it when you defend the honor of your city."

"Good." I plucked two toothpicks from a nearby stall counter, gave one to you, and picked my own teeth as a hint. You got it. I tried not to look, but it was oddly mesmerizing to watch you coax offending corn kernels out from where they'd gotten stuck.

"So," I said, "you're headed to L2 from here?"

You grinned a luminous grin. "Floating on the far side of Luna. That's where they keep the really big radio telescopes, shielded from all of this traffic and noise. Earth and Luna like to talk to each other. And look at each other. The big lunar cities are all on this side, gazing downwell. I get to look upward and outward at everything else instead! Or at least I'll get to fetch the coffee for all the real astrophysicists who live there. Still, I can't wait." You set your toothpick inside a bin so it wouldn't float away and get inhaled accidentally during the next bridge-wide gravity dip. "Speaking of coffee, I was promised some. There's a stall right over there."

"Undrinkable," I said. "We'll need to switch bridges at the next stop to get to Cortado."

The absolute best of the Cortado cafés is on the downtown side of the neighborhood, in what used to be the cargo hold

of a derelict shuttle, so that's where we went to sip the first of several cafecitos.

I confessed that the neighborhood was staying put because of a bandage that I'd only just wrapped around its mooring. You seemed delighted by the danger rather than alarmed. Then you quoted the first line of my favorite Zorro movie. I had no choice but to say the next line. We kept going, swapping characters back and forth and reciting the entire thing across our café table. Neither of us cheated by calling up the script to scroll inside our eyes. I could tell by the way you looked at me the whole time and never hesitated over a line, not even when Cortado shifted to accommodate the passage of another neighborhood.

I knew the shift was coming, though I'm not sure how I knew. Cortado isn't where I live and sleep. I didn't have sea legs for these particular streets and corridors. Eleum doesn't move like predictable clockwork, either—this place moves like a blissfully confident octopus onstage. Sometimes the background hum of kinetic motion does make sense to me, though, and this was one of those times. I knew what my city was going to do next, which made me want to stick out my tongue at your comment that L1 points were never truly stable. I also wanted to warn you, but I didn't, because right at that moment you were halfway through Friar Felipe's monologue and I really didn't want to interrupt. Instead of saying something, I took your hand and squeezed before the lights dimmed and the gravity got weird.

You squeezed back, finished the friar's speech despite the

shifting gravity, and didn't let go of my hand for the rest of the night. I had to use my left hand to pick up my drink and almost spilled intensely sugary espresso all over myself.

After seven hours of walking and talking and laughing and caffeinating, I got you to the departure gates on time—barely, because I insisted that we go wide around the Neci Bridge to find a better breakfast.

“Bye.”

“Bye.”

“Thanks for staying up all night,” you said.

“Have fun watching the rest of the universe.”

“I'll need to keep radio silent at L2,” you said. “That's the whole point of L2. So you won't hear from me for a couple of months, but I'll be coming back this way after that. Here's the shuttle number.” Your words stuck together, like you weren't sure what order they were supposed to go in. Were you nervous? During the past seven hours, you hadn't seemed nervous about anything—not even exploring an accidental and probably inadvisable city held together by duct tape and hope—but now you sounded nervous about me. “See you then?”

I squeezed your hand. “See you then. Unless Eleum flies apart first.”

“Try to keep that from happening.”

“I'll do my best.”

I'm not sure when the talking stopped and the kissing started. Then the kissing stopped, and you flew away to the far side of the moon.

Tía Cassie fixed me with a look when I stumbled back into her workshop. Her latest pair of eyes glinted gold around narrow pupils, like a cat's. I bet she used real gold leaf to make those shiny irises.

“Whose orbit are you in, kid?” Tía asked.

I ignored the question because I didn't like the image. I'd never been pulled into anyone else's orbit before. I used to be safe, secure, and stable in my own personal L-point, beholden to no other gravity, but then you warped space-time all around me. That was fantastic while you were still here, and much less fantastic the instant you left. Now it felt like I was falling. Objects in orbit are always falling.

“Need work,” I said.

“Need sleep,” Tía insisted. “No wandering around outside until after you get some rest.”

I grumbled and agreed to stay out of my suit, and out of the airlock, but I didn't leave the workshop. I knew I couldn't sleep. Too wired. My whole body seemed to be vibrating at the frequency of a completely separate universe.

I picked up one of Tía's extra eyeballs. The iris was bright red and spiky. “Some people think you spliced your DNA with alien strains from Europa and that's why you've got otherworldly eyes.”

“Started that rumor myself,” she told me. “Helps filter out the folks who aren't worth talking to.”

Mentioning alien strains from Europa reminded me that

I should check on Bex in quarantine. I didn't, though. Bex would ask about you, and I wasn't sure what to say.

Remember that moment when Cortado shifted and I took your hand with all the confidence of a juggling octopus acrobat? I missed that feeling. I missed knowing what the kinetic motion all around us really meant. Now I couldn't parse any of it, even here at home in Tía's workshop, surrounded by my own neighborhood.

I set the demonic red eye back in its case. "Hey, Tía?"

"Hm?"

"About that tongue mesh that your eyes talk to . . ."

"What about it?"

"Do you think it could process other kinds of signals?"

She fixed me with a look. "What kinds, exactly?"

"I don't know," I said, even though I did know. "Information that our senses don't usually have access to. Weather patterns on Jupiter, maybe."

Tía put down her tools and closed her eyes. (It takes extra concentration to speak when you're also using your tongue to see.) "Why would you want a permanent hurricane simulation messing with your taste buds?"

"Bad example." I took a breath before asking what I really wanted to ask. "How about motion sensor data from all over Eleum? Tensor strength in different neighborhood tethers. A live schedule of every bridge."

"Why?"

Here's what I didn't say: *Because it turns out that L1 points aren't as stable as I always thought, which means Eleum is even*

more precarious and wobbly than we already knew, and right now I feel just as wobbly. I want my equilibrium back.

Here's what I actually said: "Because it might help make our repair work more efficient. Do you think it's possible to learn how to taste that sort of thing?"

"Sounds like a headache," Tía said. "But sure, theoretically. Tongues are erogenous zones. Already wired for extra attention and complex input."

Thinking about tongues as erogenous zones would not help me recover my lost equilibrium. "Can you show me how to wire up a sensor mesh?"

Tía waved me away and went back to work. "Later. Get some rest. You've got school tomorrow. Come find me after that if you still want to taste the way our city moves."

The mesh on my tongue tasted faintly metallic. Networked signals from all around Eleum tickled like the fizzy bubbles in Bex's terrible soda. I kept practicing anyway. Complex sensations danced inside my mouth. None of it meant anything—not until late one night when I went out walking alone.

It was dark. Luna loomed to one side, lunar cities glowing against the dusky blanket of the new moon. Eleum danced in the in-between. I watched my city move all around me, loving the sheer, ridiculous bravado that it took for us to even exist out here.

Then my perspective shifted. Kinesthesia expanded. My entire sense of self became city-size.

I don't know how long I stood there, savoring how it felt

to move like a massive space cephalopod yo-yo champion of a metropolis. Eventually, my morning alarm went off, which broke the hypnotic flow. Signals from Eleum turned back into background fizzing in my mouth. I clicked my tongue, switched the mesh off, and went inside to find some coffee.

“My cousin’s coming back soon,” Bex said, newly released from quarantine with no icky symptoms of ichthyic transformation.

“Mm-hmm,” I answered, trying to act like I hadn’t been counting the days.

“I’m kinda busy, though,” Bex said. “Think you can play host again without me?”

YES, I thought.

“Sure,” I said.

Three bridges shut down the night before your shuttle arrived, so Tía Cassie and every other techie I knew got diverted to round-the-clock bridge repair—everyone except me, because I was still too young to work an official shift.

Tía offered to sneak me in anyway. I politely declined. That surprised her. “Kid, you were building model bridges before you could walk. Now you don’t want to tinker with the real thing?”

I mumbled something about having stuff to do.

With the bridges down, I couldn’t reach your arrival gate in time, so we arranged by text to meet in Cortado. You got lost, because downloadable maps don’t ever hold still in Eleum. I also got lost, because the broken bridges made

everything wonky. We tried and failed to joke about it, texting our unfunny frustrations at each other as everything conspired to keep us apart. These were the first words we’d shared since you’d flown into L2’s bubble of silent contemplation.

I turned on the tongue mesh and closed my eyes. I needed to sense how the neighborhoods were navigating around one another. That should have been easy, like touching a fingertip to my nose with my eyes closed. It wasn’t easy, though. Getting both of us back into that little shuttle café in Cortado took almost two hours.

We didn’t kiss hello. The moment when we should have passed so quickly that I didn’t even notice until it was already gone. You grabbed us a table. I fetched us the coffee. Then I realized I still had a mesh of tiny sensors stuck all over the surface of my tongue, which would probably make kissing awkward. Thinking about it made me click my enmeshed tongue against the roof of my mouth, which switched the sensors on. I’m not sure why I did that. Maybe it was habit. Maybe I wanted to feel confidently city-size while sitting across from you.

That was when you leaned across the table to kiss me.

I’m really sorry about what happened next.

My city-sense tingled. I felt motion in every direction, and then I recognized the Cortado tether. I felt it weaken. My Band-Aid was breaking. Momentum would send this whole neighborhood hurtling into the sky when that tether broke, and the worst part was that we wouldn’t sail clear. The shipyards at the outer edge of town would block our way. I could

feel it. Careening into that would be like hitting the city with a comet from the inside, and then all of Eleum would fly apart. I felt like my whole body was about to fly apart.

That's why I panicked when you kissed me.

That's why I bit down hard on the tip of your tongue.

I'm really, really sorry. I wish I'd said so at the time. I should have paused to check in, make sure you were okay, and offer you a napkin to dab your bleeding tongue wound. Instead, I stood on our table and shouted, "Everybody out!"

No one moved. You'd think that people who'd lived their whole lives in an accidental space city would be less reluctant to recognize emergencies, but nope. *There's a hull breach? That sucks. Let me finish my coffee before I start caring.*

Eduardo, the owner, shouted back at me from behind the counter. "What's the problem?"

I didn't know how to explain. *Fear me, for I have become one with Eleum! I taste the city electric, and also its doom . . . and also the blood of my companion here, because our second date is going very badly so far. Heed my prophecy and flee this place!*

Instead of explaining, I pointed at two antique suits on the wall. "Do those still work?"

"No idea," Eduardo said. "They're just for decoration. Came with the place when my grandparents bought it. Now get down from my table, please."

I got down from the table. "You have to go. Hurry. Trust me—I'm on the repair crew, and you have to get out of here."

Eduardo seemed unfazed and unimpressed. "If you were really on the crew, you'd be fixing bridges right now."

"Eddie, I promise you this café will decompress in minutes. Please go before that happens. Find a shelter far from the outer hull."

"Don't ever call me Eddie," Eduardo said. He still left. So did everyone else—everyone except for you.

I tried and failed to get you to follow them. "Go. I can fix this, but I need to go outside first."

"There are two of those suits," you pointed out.

Watching you climb inside a bulky suit shouldn't have made my mouth go dry, but it did. Why would putting clothes on remind me of taking them off? The distraction and the sudden lack of spit switched off my city-sense. My body felt me-size again. I awkwardly stuffed myself into the other suit.

"So what's going on?" you asked while trying to figure out how the helmet clasps worked.

"Remember the Band-Aid I told you about before?"

"The one that keeps this part of the station in place?"

"City, not station. And yes. That one. It's breaking."

"How do you know?"

"Tell you later." I still felt too tongue-tied to explain properly.

"What happens when it breaks?"

"We ram into the shipyards."

"That sounds bad."

"Very."

"So what should we do about it?"

"We'll cut ourselves loose."

You seemed understandably skeptical of my brilliant

“I want a young adult voice, then, please, with a Midwestern accent. The gender doesn’t matter,” Cadence says, because it will not be a boy’s or a girl’s voice once it is in their mouth.

The woman presses her thin lips together. Cadence begins to sweat, shifting uncomfortably in the hard plastic chair. They know that there are unspoken rules to body modification, that you can become a different type of boy or girl as long as you *remain* either a boy or a girl. Cadence has a cousin who had her skin lightened, shares a locker with a white boy weeb who gave himself anime eyes. These things are allowed. But the modification industry has been careful to distance itself from “fringe” cultures that “abuse” the technology—and in this part of the world in particular, they are more conservative still. Legally, they cannot deny Cadence gender-affirming services. But they can wrinkle their nose at the idea.

“Right this way, then,” the woman says after a moment.

Cadence is suddenly very lonely. Their eyes burn with the threat of tears as they follow the woman to the sound booth. They wonder if they are doing the right thing. They wonder if it will hurt. But once they start listening to the voices, they begin to feel a little bit better. Excited, even. They have waited years for this. They will savor the moment.

The first voice belongs—belonged—to a nineteen-year-old from Chicago named Marcus Tomlin. His voice is deep, deeper than Cadence’s natural speaking voice, with a flat accent that’s a little stronger than Cadence is looking for. “He thrusts his fists against the posts and still insists he sees the ghosts,” he says. This is probably not something Marcus ever

said in life. It is just a sample sentence, one that shows off the capabilities of the computer-generated re-creation. He says more things, like “The jolly collie swallowed a lollipop” and “Lesser leather never weathered wetter weather better.” It is a bold, brassy speaking voice. It exudes confidence, control. Cadence would like, desperately, to be that kind of person. But it would be the wrong reason to choose a voice. Confidence is not something you can just graft onto yourself; Cadence’s mother was right about that much. The confidence will come from having chosen the *right* voice, not from the voice itself.

They move on.

The next voice belonged to a fifteen-year-old from Ohio named Chris Li. His voice is higher, lighter, and it has a ringing quality to it, like it’s constantly on the edge of laughter. Something about this fills Cadence with an acute sadness. All the voices they will hear are from young donors, but fifteen is *very* young. They wonder how Chris died. They wonder if, when Chris got his parents to sign off on him being a donor, he had any idea he’d be taken so soon. And they wonder why he even became a donor in the first place. There is money in it—not much, but enough to make a difference for many people. For others, it’s about immortality. But for someone as young as Chris, it was probably for the status. If you can’t afford your own mods, saying you’ve donated one is the next best thing. Whatever the reason, Cadence cannot shake the feeling that they would be stealing something from Chris by choosing this mod—or maybe, more accurately, taking something that was stolen. And they cannot bear the weight of that.

They move on.