



I WAKE ON MY FEET, wind tangled in my hair. The sand is cold beneath my arches and the tide is rising, white foam and gray water frothing around my ankles before fizzing through my toes.

My *bare* toes.

That alone wouldn't be a problem. But I'm also in M.M.'s cargo pants, the softest pair in her moth-eaten closet. I wore them to bed last night, the same night, apparently, I sleepwalked to the shore. Again.

"Shit."

"Shit," repeats a voice—monotone, compared to the wave-forms rising from the sea before me. My sleep-soaked eyes swivel over my shoulder and spot U-me as she rolls through the morning mist enshrouding the beach. Her belted wheels leave behind triangles like paw prints. Her boxy head, perched atop a canister body, comes halfway up my thigh when she reaches my side. "Shit: fecal matter, noun; to expel feces from the body, verb; to deceive—"

“I locked the door.”

U-me switches gears at the declarative. “Strongly agree.”

“You hid the key in the house.”

“Strongly agree.”

The surf surges forward, forcing me back onto the beach. As I retreat, a glint on the ground snags my eye.

The house key, embedded like a shell in the gray sand.

I scoop it up. “*Shit.*”

The one-worrier sends U-me down dictionary lane a second time. I barely hear her over the sea’s drone.

Every other sleep, I dream of swimming to the horizon and finding my sister at the edge of the world. She takes me by the hand and leads us home. Home means a city in the sky, sometimes. Or another island. Home could be here, for all I care, if she were with me. She’s not. I don’t know what separated us, just that waking up really sucks, especially when my body is hell-bent on miming the dreams no matter how many doors I lock. My solution? Turn dreams into reality. Find my sister, sooner preferably to later.

“Come on, love,” I say to U-me, turning my back to the tide. “Let’s try to beat the sun.”

I stalk up the beach. My shoulders still ache from the last trip inland, but recovery can wait. The first of my nighttime escapades never took me into the water. Today, I’m ankle-deep. Tomorrow? Finish Hubert today, and I won’t stick around to find out.

In fifty strides, I’m upon M.M.’s house. It sits daredevilishly close to the coastline, a squat little shack overlooking the

ocean from atop a bed of rocks, half-sunken into the sand. Stuff's everywhere. On the porch steps. The deck. Prized possessions, like M.M.'s fanny pack, must be stored above sand level. I tear the pack off the porch rail, then loop to the house side, where Hubert is lounging.

"Morning, Bert." I shoulder the pack. "Feeling lucky today?"

No reply. Hubert's not very chatty, which is fine by me. I make the small talk; he keeps me sane by existing.

You see, I've divided my time on this island into life-before-Hubert and life after. Life-before-Hubert . . . Joules, I hardly remember what I did to pass the days. Probably planting taro, fixing M.M.'s water pipes. Standard survival stuff.

Then I successfully completed my first journey inland and met Hubert. He was in pieces. Now he's one propeller short of his normal self, and I have to say, I'm proud of how far we've come. Sure, bringing back his body almost broke mine, and a freaky situation involving his hull, some rope, and gravity nearly tourniqueted off my leg, but he's relying on me and that gives me strength. I'm relying on him, too. I *wish* I could swim to my sister like I do in my dreams. The problem with oceans? They always seem smaller from the shore.

"Just you wait, love," I say to Hubert, nudging him with my foot. "You. Me. The sea. This evening."

One propeller.

I won't return without it.

U-me rolls over and together we set off inland. We outstrip the sounds of the sea and gulls, until it's just the crunch of rock under U-me's wheels, the squish of gray mud under my

rubber clogs—compliments of M.M.—and foggy silence for kilometers on end. Eventually, the mud calcifies to shale. Pools of rainwater form little shallow, sterile ponds. Shrubs lean in the direction of the wind, their roots crawling like veins along the rock. This side of the island—shore side—is mostly flat in elevation. If not for the fog, you'd be able to see straight to the ridge. It bisects the island, a wall of stone that can't be circumnavigated, only climbed.

In the shadow of the towering ridge face, I unzip my pack, remove the coil of nylon rope, and drape it around U-me's neck. "You know what to do."

"Strongly agree." She rolls over the ridge's crumbling base and up, shrinking to a speck. At the top, she sends the now-fastened rope back to me. All one hundred meters tumble down.

I catch the end and yank, checking that it's secure before knotting it around my waist. I get as good a grip as I can around the slick nylon, breathe in, and push off the ground.

Foothold. Handhold. Repeat. The rising sun warms my shoulders as I hit the final stretch. I heave myself onto the narrow ridgetop, drenched beneath M.M.'s sweater, and catch my breath while surveying the land on the other side. Meadow-side. Grayscale like the rest of the island, trees growing in scraggly bunches. Brick mounds swell through the waist-high grass like tumors. I have yet to figure out what they are. Shrines, maybe. Very mossy, neglected shrines.

Shaking out my arms, I start the descent. U-me rolls beside me, occasionally beeping out a "Strongly disagree" in response

to my foothold choices. But I've memorized most of the soft spots in the ridge, and I order her back up top when I'm half-way down.

The untied rope drops just as my feet hit the ground. I stuff it into my pack and pat U-me's head when she rejoins me. "Good work, love."

Aside from us, the mist is the only moving thing in the meadow this morning. I try my best to ignore the shrines and attribute my goose bumps to the sweat cooling on my back. Hunger stabs my stomach, but I don't stop for a taro biscuit. Not here. Doesn't feel right to eat here.

The meadow ends with a sparse forest of pines. Several are fused along the trunk like conjoined twins. Infiltrating the pines are eight-point-leaf trees. They dominate the forest deeper in. Branches clasp above our heads, leaves strewing the path with rotting mulch. A beetle darts in front of us—and ends up under U-me's wheels.

Crunch.

I flinch. The taking of a life—however small—seems bigger when there's so little of it on this island already. "Heartless."

"Heartless: without feeling, adjective; cruel, adjective."

"Or literally without a heart."

"Neutral."

"Okay, what do you even mean by that? Neutral to the definition? Or to the idea of not having a heart?"

U-me's fans whir.

I duck under a low-hanging branch. "Right. Sorry, love.

Forgot you don't do direct questions." *Along with a bajillion other things.*

When I first found U-me in the cupboard under M.M.'s sink, in need of some sun juice, I'd danced around the house. A bot could help me build the boat. Or map out the waters in my vicinity. Or simply provide me critical intel, like where I'm from and how to find my sister.

Except U-me isn't your average bot. She's a mash-up of a dictionary and a questionnaire rating scale, about as useful to me as . . . well, a dictionary or questionnaire rating scale. It helps that she can tie ropes, dig holes, and follow my lead, like roll over in the general direction of the junk piles when we finally arrive at the Shipyard, my name for the clearing in the forest, where there's another little shrine and something that looks a lot like a swimming pool. The rim is overgrown with moss and surrounded by heaps of scrap metal. Most of the scraps are oxidized, deformed, and unsalvageable, especially now that I've used what was salvageable on Hubert.

Still, I crouch and go through the piles, methodically at first, then less so. The odds of finding a propeller are slim. But so were the odds of finding *any* boat parts and yet, here we are: hull, rudder, tiller, motor, bolt, all accounted for. Just when I think, *That's it, my luck's run out*, I find another piece. What's more, each piece seems to come from the same boat. It's kind of magical. Everything about Hubert is. He came to me at a time when I needed him most. *Don't give up*, the universe seemed to be saying on the day I met him. And I haven't. I'm so close to finding Kay. My breath shortens as I think of her. A

flash of sequins. A shriek of a laugh. A cherry-ice pop stained smile, the color red a fleeting memory. Two hands joined, mine and hers. An impossibly white ladder, connecting sky to sea. We splash in and float for days.

When I linger in the memory, though, the water around us trembles. I see a boat, carried away by the waves. I hear a whisper—*I'm sorry*—laced with the sorrow of a goodbye.

Positive thoughts. It's better to focus on the present. To break things down into manageable tasks. Build Hubert. Find Kay.

Build.

Find.

Build.

Find.

But despite this, dread poisons my thoughts anyway.

I drop the scrap in my hands. My knees crack as I rise. Pins needle my toes as I walk to the edge of the pool. It brims with rainwater, reflecting a wobbly image of me: a girl with straight, dark hair just past shoulder-length, face too pale and eyes black, if I have to guess. Along with my memories, I've lost my ability to see in color. Weird, I know. Weirder is what happens next. The image in the water shifts, and I'm looking at a reflection of Kay.

"Where are you?" she asks, her voice a quieter, deeper version of mine.

"I'm coming, love."

"You're forgetting." I shake my head vehemently, but Kay goes on. "Look again," she says. "You're just seeing yourself."

And I am.

The girl in the water isn't Kay.

It's just me.

My pulse drums in my ears. Obviously, my sister isn't here. But the Kay-of-my-mind is right: I *am* forgetting. When I dream of her, it's in vibrant color, unlike the gradients of gray of my monochrome days. But everything is hazy when I wake. The details merge. The colors fade.

I screw my eyes shut as if to wring them out. Reopen them. The tiles at the bottom of the pool shimmer. The water seems to be calling my name.

Cee.

My feet move to the rim before I realize what I'm doing. I slap my cheeks. I'm awake. Not dreaming. Not sleepwalking. Definitely *not* going to end up in microbe soup.

One step after another, I back up. My chest tenses, like there's a rubber band slung between it and the water. I'm half afraid my heart's going to snap out when I tear myself away from the pool, but it remains firmly behind my ribs, pounding hard as I kneel back beside the junk pile.

Sometimes the need to find Kay overwhelms me, so I don't think about Kay. I think about Hubert, who's depending on me. I think about the sea and how impossible-to-swim big it is. I think about all the restless nights I've spent in M.M.'s house, dressed in her sweaters and cargo pants, living a hand-me-down life. Nothing here is truly mine. Not even U-me. My real home waits for me across the sea.

First things first: Get off the island.

I dig deeper—and yank my hand away, hissing. Then the

pain recedes, because I see the blade. It protrudes from the dirt, glistening with some gray liquid—my blood, I think. I also think . . .

Don't jinx it.

Carefully, I ease the blade free. Two more emerge, all three spiraling around a hub. I hold it up to the light streaming through the trees. The three metal petals wink, slightly dented but otherwise very propeller-shaped to my amateur eye.

“Joules.” *Am I dreaming?*

Nope, still bleeding. Still holding on to the tarnished propeller like it's some exotic flower.

U-me rolls to me. “Joules: a unit of work energy, noun—”

“Fucking megajoules! We did it, U-me!” I tackle-hug her, then let out a whoop that echoes across the island. U-me blinks, probably wondering if the sound counts as a translatable word. Whatever her verdict, I don't hear it. I'm already rushing back to the ridge, not sure if I should cry or laugh or shout some more.

So I do all three.

Goodbye, meadow. I dash through the too-tall grass. *Goodbye, shrines.*

Goodbye, ridge. I scale it in record time, my arms numbed by adrenaline. *Goodbye, M.M. Thank you for sharing your house. Sorry the moths got to your sweaters before I did.*

I save the last goodbye for myself, the only soul on this Joules-forsaken place. Trust me, I've searched. Everywhere. Whittled my situation down to the disheartening facts:

#1 I'm on an abandoned island.

#2 I have no idea how or why, because (see #3)

#3 I quite possibly have a case of amnesia that worsens by the day.

Not-so-disheartening fact #4?

I'm out of here.

2

FROM A DISTANCE, THE CITY in the sky appeared as lifeless as the ocean below it.

Beneath the surface was a different story.

Inside stratum-99, the penultimate level of the eco-city, the party had left Kasey Mizuhara marooned at her own kitchen island. As everyone else jumped to the beat, bodies shimmering under the blacklight, Kasey stood behind a facade of drinks and cups, watching like one might watch animals at a zoo, except she didn't feel quite human. Alien was more like it. Or ghost.

About time. Kasey had missed her invisibility. She'd been recognized twice in the last week alone, and when the first wave of partiers had logged in, she'd almost logged out.

But the universe had a way of balancing itself. Within fifteen minutes, a group of Kasey's classmates mistook her for the hired bartender. Then, while Kasey was winging the mixed drinks, Meridian messaged to say she could no longer make it. *That's fine*, Kasey sent back. Better than fine, actually,

that the mastermind of Kasey's so-called "moving on" party wasn't present for it. Because no one was here for Kasey, to her great relief.

To her equally great consternation, everyone was here for her sister, Celia.

Case in point: "Fifty bytes she shows up tonight," a girl on the dance floor said to her partner, her words captioned in Kasey's mind's eye thanks to her Intraface. The most portable computer yet, the Intraface was an interface within the brain capable of capturing memories, transmitting thought-to-speech messages, and—in this instance—lip-reading sentiments Kasey found ludicrous but forgivable. Crashing her own party would be a Celia thing to do. She'd show up fashionably late, bedecked in sequins, and everyone would stare, the fear of missing out on a laugh, a kiss, a whispered confidence written over their faces.

Even then, they missed things.

Like the way Celia never failed to find Kasey among a crowd.

The way Celia found her now.

A pulse went through Kasey. She tore her gaze from the sea of bobbing heads and focused on the city she was modeling out of cups. It was the lights. The music. Too dark, too loud, messing with her senses. Withdrawing inward, she tended to the slew of log-in requests cluttering her mind's eye. ACCEPT GUEST. ACCEPT GUEST. ACCEPT GUEST. More people appeared on the dance floor. None, however, could outclass

her sister, and Celia was still there when Kasey dared another glance. She was dancing with a boy. Their gazes met, and Celia lifted her perfectly lasered brow as if to say: *This one's a catch. Want to try your luck, love?*

Kasey tried to shake her head. Couldn't. Was transfixed as her sister abandoned the boy and slipped through the partiers with ease. She joined Kasey by the island, dispersing the group that was blowing rings of hallucinogenic smoke in Kasey's direction.

The smoke cleared.

Celia disappeared.

In her place was a girl with electric-blue hair and Newton's cradles for earrings. *Gimmicky*, Celia would have said, whereas Kasey might have actually found the earrings pretty cool if her mind hadn't flatlined, deleting all opinions, fashion or otherwise, her heart racing 100 bpm as the girl seized a cup and filled it. "Quick, talk to me."

Was she still hallucinating? "Me?" Kasey asked, checking to see that the kitchen island had, in fact, been deserted.

"Yes, you," said the girl, prompting Kasey's Intraface to launch SILVERTONGUE, a conversation aid recommended by Celia. *It'll make things easier*, her sister had promised.

Mostly, its rapid-fire tips just made Kasey dizzy. She blinked, popping the bubbles lathering her vision. "Talk to you about . . . ?"

"Anything."

Insufficient parameters. Annoyed, Kasey surveyed her surroundings for inspiration. "The entire human population fits

into a one cubic kilometer cube?” The fact came out sounding like a question; she corrected her inflection. “The entire human population fits into a one cubic kilometer cube.”

“**REPETITION DETECTED!**” chimed SILVERTONGUE in disapproval.

“Really?” said the girl, peering at the dance floor over the rim of her cup. “Go on.”

“About the homo sapiens volume?”

The girl laughed, as if Kasey had told a joke. Had she? Jokes were good. Humor was a core trait on the Coles Humanness Scale. It was just . . . Kasey hadn’t been expecting laughter as a reaction. This wasn’t going well, by standards of an experiment. She had half a mind to ask the girl what was so funny, but was outpaced by the conversation.

“Thanks a million,” said the girl, looking away from the dance floor and finally facing Kasey. “Some people can’t take a ‘not interested’ hint to save their life. So, you here to see her too?”

Questions were straightforward. Questions, Kasey could handle, especially when she knew the anticipated answer. “Her?” she asked, only because she didn’t want to encourage it.

She waited for Celia’s name. Braced herself for it.

“Yeah, Kasey? Party host?” The girl nodded at the city Kasey had built out of cups when she failed to reply. “Guessing you aren’t here to mingle. Gets old fast, once you get over how real it feels. The younger sister, though . . .”

Don’t ask. Nothing good could come of it.

“What about her?” Kasey asked, caving to her curiosity.

"I don't know." The girl sipped her drink, eyes veiled. "That's the lure, isn't it? One minute, she's dodging the press. The next, she's e-viting everyone within a twenty-stratum radius to her party. The disconnect is disturbing, don't you think? Like, I have a sister too, and I don't know what I'd do if she went missing." A new song came on, heavy on the delta-synth. "But sure as hell wouldn't be jamming it up to Zika Tu."

Fair. All solid points. "Maybe it's her moving-on party," Kasey offered, rather wishing now Meridian hadn't flaked. Meridian would've been able to explain, in the same way she'd explained to Kasey, why this party made perfect sense, for reasons Kasey was blanking on.

Oh well. She'd tried. She added another cup to her city—and almost knocked the whole thing over when the girl said, "Hard to move on when they still haven't found a body. Too morbid?" she asked as Kasey steadied her model. One cup rolled out of her reach. The girl caught it. "Sorry." She placed the cup atop two others, where it wobbled. Kasey fixed it. "I keep forgetting it's different here. Where I'm from, bodies are every . . . okay, yeah, I'll stop." She bobbed her drink at Kasey. "That's me for you. Yvone, queen of gaffes."

Silence followed.

The girl was waiting, Kasey realized after a delay, for Kasey to introduce herself as well.

Was it too late to come clean about her identity? Probably. "Meridian."

"Sorry?"

"Meridian." How did people talk at parties? *Did* people

talk at parties? Why couldn't this girl have ordered a drink like everyone else and been on her merry way? "*Meridian*," Kasey repeated as the music turned up.

"*What?*"

"*Meridian*." Was it condescending to spell out a name? Or overkill, when the name was as long as Meridian? She should've picked something shorter, in hindsight. "*M-E-R—*"

"Wait, I got it." The girl blinked at Kasey three times, causing Kasey's Intraface to emit a cheery little *ding* as it projected Kasey's ID over her head.

MIZUHARA, KASEY

Rank: 2

Crap.

Kasey canceled the projection, then checked to see if anyone had noticed. Outside, in streets, schools, shops, or any public domain, rank was auto-displayed, the number over your head dogging you wherever you went. Private domains were the only respite. As such, it was considered bad form to swagger around with your rank when it wasn't required.

It was also bad form to lie about your name.

"You're . . ." A frown spread across Yvone's face. "Celia's . . ."

Abort. The LOG OUT screen, already up on Kasey's Intraface, was just a CONFIRM button away when something clapped onto her shoulder.

A hand.

"Kasey?"

She turned—

—and knew, the second she saw the boy, that he was one

of Celia's. Tristan, his name must have been. Or Dmitri. One of the two.

Which?

"Kasey," repeated Tristan/Dmitri, blinking as if he didn't quite believe his eyes. Behind him, the crowd danced on. Kasey would've given anything to be in the thick of it right now. "Thank Joules. I've been trying to reach you for months."

As had everyone else. Spam and malware had flooded her Intraface. All unknown contacts, she'd had to filter out.

"I need to know if it was my fault," Tristan/Dmitri said, voice rising when Kasey shook her head. "*I need to know!*"

Yvone's gaze darted between the two of them, sponging up the exchange.

"I can't sleep at night." Tristan/Dmitri's chest heaved. He took a wet-sounding breath. Kasey's mouth was dry as dust. "Haven't been able to, ever since . . . I thought we were cool, after the breakup, I thought—but now I wonder—was it something I said? Something I did?"

Dmitri, Kasey wanted to say; she did, after all, have a fifty-fifty chance at guessing right. *It's not your fault*. Not anyone's fault. Sometimes there were no answers. No cause and effect, no perpetrators and victims. Only accidents.

But those weren't the words of a loving sister, Kasey knew. Just didn't know how to act like one. A loving sister wouldn't let statistics guide her decisions. *Tristan or Dmitri?* Wouldn't be throwing a party without knowing why, motive left open to interpretation. *Tristan or Dmitri?*

How could she be okay with fifty-fifty?

How could she be *okay* when no one else was?

The bass gobbled up Kasey's heartbeat. Her chest felt weak. She fumbled for the kitchen island behind her, clutching it like the rim of a pool. "Hey, buddy," she heard Yvone saying to Tristan/Dmitri, her voice murky as if buffered by water. "You've got the wrong person."

"I saw her ID just now."

"Well, you saw wrong."

It was nice of Yvone to cover for Kasey. Kasey should have thanked her. Celia would have, not that she'd ever be in Kasey's situation, but *if*, hypothetically.

Celia would have done a thousand things differently from Kasey, who pressed CONFIRM LOG OUT.

The kitchen island vanished. The dance floor, the lights, the drinks and cups, consumables that would turn into carbon emissions at the end of their life cycles if they existed, disappeared, only ever strings of code. Over in the virtual domain, the party went on for everyone still logged in. No one would miss Kasey.

Just as well.

Kasey opened her eyes to the blue-dark of her stasis pod. Its sarcophagus-like interior glowed faintly with data arrays transmitted from her Intraface's biomonitor app, which tracked her vitals whenever she holo-ed. Her heartbeat, while high, fell within the normal range. Her peripheral vision displayed the time—00:15—and the current number of residents still traversing the eco-city as holographic versions of themselves: 36.2%.

Holoing, as it was called, was less of a green alternative and more of a last resort. To live sustainably, people had to live less. Conduct nonessential activities (“essentials” being eating, sleeping, and exercising) in the holographic mode. Fine-dine and jet-set virtually, without trace or footprint. Reduce transportation needs and shrink infrastructure, energy and materials conserved. Concede these things and only then could architects build eco-friendly cities in the skies, safe from rising sea levels. The trade-offs were worth it, in Kasey’s opinion. A minority one. Most people rejected living like bento-packed vegetables—be it for their own good or the planet’s—and stayed in their land-bound territories. The weather was more extreme, yes, but sufferable. The arctic melt, while lamentable, didn’t affect them like it did island and coastal populations.

But the wildfires did. The hurricanes and monsoons. Earthquakes rose in magnitude, exacerbated by decades of deep-crust mining. Natural disasters catalyzed man-made ones: chemical factories and fission plants compromised, meltdowns disseminating radioaxons, nanoparticles, and microcinogens across the land and sea. Global opinion flipped overnight. Eco-cities came to be viewed as utopias, so removed from disaster epicenters. And holoing from one’s stasis pod, once seen as restrictive, came to represent freedom and safety. Why experience something in real life when real life had become so volatile?

Why? Kasey wondered now to her sister, even though she knew. Boundaries existed so that Celia could push them.

Nothing was off-limits, no trouble too deep. Her sister was *alive* in a world increasingly removed from life. It was why people found it difficult to cope with the news of her disappearance, with some going as far as to straight-up deny it.

Fifty bytes she shows up tonight.

Others grieved.

I have a sister too.

Still others blamed themselves.

I need to know if it was my fault.

This, Kasey found to be the most nonsensical reaction of all. Her sister was gone. No amount of lost sleep could reverse that. Guilt was irrelevant. Irrational.

Kasey wished she felt less of it.