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GOODNIGHT, SIMON

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A capstone project submitted for Graduation with University Honors.

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ABSTRACT

Goodnight, Simon is a novel that follows Simon, a little boy creating life on other planets to get closer to his family and to satiate his loneliness. The story as a whole mixes mythology, geology, chemistry, biology, creationism, and familial drama to largely encompass the current human experience. Through this fictional lens, we'll go from before abiogenesis, to the cambrian explosion, to the extinction of the dinosaurs, to humans taking their first steps towards our modern age. On the more interpersonal level, it's a coming of age story, as well as creative development and discussion between a mother and son.

The novel is meant to be a shared reading between parents and their children, giving way to future discussions about boundaries, creative freedoms, and how to take criticism. It is also meant to be educational, looking towards Earth's history, as well as an introduction to evolution, biology, and astronomy. I hope it will be enlightening for those curious about an amalgamation between fiction and science.

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Goodnight, Simon

By Em Williams



Prologue

Simon rushed forward, crossing brambles, and flinging them to the side like shackles as he tore across his mother's garden. Barreling, he destroyed millions of years of hard work, causing flower petals to fall due to stress. All that beauty and lovely colors were starting to wilt and die. He brought this upon himself, didn't he? And for what? Because he wanted there to be more like them in the universe? Because he didn't want him or any of them to be lonely? Because he lied?

The ripples in the background flung themselves to the sides, their pink fur spiking from fear. I'm so sorry, he thought as he continued to trundle through the tender undergrowth. He came to the ocean that sat beyond the garden. It was so pristine, just like his... And the cliff below was as jagged as the craggy mountain tops. He'd never be able to go back! He cringed and cursed his situation as he saw his predator's clothes above the treetops, as stiff and cold as ice.

Lucas' face was a charred mess with red etching sketched over it. Fire dripped from the chasms, sparking the grass aflame under him. He neared the edge of the cliff, trying to get as much distance between them as possible. His voice was non existence as she pushed all the gas out of his reach. He pulled for the words that his mother had handed him if anything were to ever go wrong. That if he would ever manage to upset anyone!

His thoughts grew fuzzy and estranged. He darted a glance behind him, as he began to hear her crunch on the grass just beyond the trees, akin to one of his lions circling a gazelle with their pride. The banging lines of correlations wouldn't stop, perhaps the anxiety that he had built in his creatures had jumped onto him! He edged as close as he could without falling over.

Maintaining his balance, he looked back into his superior's eyes. Abyssal black holes, slowly choking and draining the matter surrounding them sat with her view, he could hear their cranking whir right now. He tried again to speak, as she marched closer, the ground now barren and sterile, just like the moon.

"I'm sorry—" he squeaked out, and fell backward, finally inching too far from her.
"-MoM," he screamed as he plunged into the icy depths beneath.



Part 1: Tabula Rasa



Chapter 1

“There, away from where we stand, is a plane. Where, contrary to popular, scientific, and methodical belief, gods stand. Not a singular god either, but multiple, a pantheon, one could say... There, back when there were three, they were creators and destroyers, giving each thing meaning, and order. Although, one fateful day, there was an exception to the idea of meaning, The Observer. A brutal, beautiful, maleficent, beneficial, (and sometimes nuts) creator that had created ourselves. But our creation is a story for another day. Let us start at the beginning, where two people meet in a garden.”

—Introduction to The Observer and Later Stories,
by Madeline Wynn

Oxygen, carbon, nitrogen, and phosphorus all went into the stagnant water, dissolving upon impact. Asha waited for a moment. She waited a bit longer.

She sat there, staring, watching, begging for something to happen.

It was idle.

Her reflection peered back up at her. Green curls twisting up towards her brown face. Her red eyes looked back. In a moment, she splashed the mirror image away with her hand, as if trying to get the failure away from her as far as possible. She couldn't take it anymore! There was nothing here. There would never be anything here! After all that she tried, after all that she did! Why did nothing work?

There was just chalk-colored dust everywhere in the atmosphere, making it opaque and choking. Below her were boiling waters, clear and sterile.

Nothing would stay, nothing could survive.

And she was here, alone again.

This was the last time that she said that she would try here, she promised her mother that. But there was something that was so suffocating and plain in this... Asha fell to the ground and sat in waiting. Staring vacantly into the abyssal pureness of it all... what was she doing? No one was here to see it. Her mother wouldn't care. So why in all ways was she doing it in the first place, to have something take root here when all the burning amino acids would not stay stable?

Burn it all! She just wanted to go home.

She didn't care anymore, she couldn't care anymore, this planet was a dud. A strange contraption that she couldn't even understand after so many fleeting tries! Burn her mother and her stupid exospheres, atmospheres and balls of molten rock.

When she did get home, she stood for a moment in that stillness. It was her garden, her beloved and favorite place in the universe. The rough pink moss at her feet, rubbing against her soles to say hi.

Everything was by her design. Everything was perfect and well thought out. Everything

had a part and a moment to shine, but still random enough from her not specifically interfering. It should've made her happy. It made her happy the past billions of years, but nothing worked! It was all stagnant! Stagnant as the cloudy-as-crystal, sterile water that she hated so much! She hoped the planet burned in the messiest way possible when its star reached the red giant phase. She screamed, running through the plants that made up her home, each one bending from the force she expelled.

She bolted through the foliage and flora until she came to a towering stem that broke into pieces as it reached towards her mother's domain. It was wonderful and majestic and everything that she could possibly hope for.

She punched it.

She punched it with all the force of an asteroid burning upon entrance to an atmosphere for a massive planet. She tore her fist away, and hit again and again and again, trying to release every piece of frustration. When she finally opened her eyes she looked to see red sap bleeding out slowly. Her anger plummeted away.

The sticky blood began to ooze into a long red line, trying to draw nutrients to fix the bruise. A passive restraint, protection, she instilled in lines of molecules. The needles on its branches above began to droop and change to a grayer color.

"No. No. No... I'm sorry, I'm sorry. I'm sorry-" she whispered, kissing the bark, it immediately reacted. The stem grew thicker and taller, the injury covered up nearly as fast as she applied the blows.

"I just... I just," she started, trying to get a hold of her breathing, feeling her legs give way to the grass beneath with a heavy thud. "Maybe I can't do it... I'm-"

"I'm-?" hummed.

“I just, why can’t I do it? Why doesn’t it work? It should work with everything!” She banged her fist on the ground, looking up to the now more slowly expanding limbs of the tough stemmed plant. The needles at the end started to turn to a burning red from their previous dark purple.

“I’m... why?”

She shot up, causing her curly green hair to cascade around her, falling from underneath her hat. “Mom? Is that you? Did you come back?”

“Mom, why you?” the voice came again. But it sounded nothing like her mother. It was too thin, like the thin strands of DNA that she constantly played with, nothing like how rock solid it should’ve been.

“Charles, if you’re playing a trick on me, it isn’t funny!” she shouted, getting up, adjusting her hat, brushing the nonexistent dust from her overalls. There was nothing in the shadows of the plants. “Come out! Wherever you are!”

“You are...” it came again.

“And I know that the ripples can’t talk! So you aren’t fooling me this time! And you know that my mother doesn’t want you here!” A slight shake started to take hold of her limbs, like plants in the wind. She spun around, trying to spot anything out of the ordinary past the various spreading stems, low-to-the-ground roots, and vines.

“Doesn’t want you...” it echoed, it now seemed to tremble, like her own voice, either in fright or sadness. It was fuller than all the times before. “Doesn’t want you... tricks... Why?” Two rainbow jawbreaker eyes stared back at her.

Her fingers fumbled for a harsh grip of her arms, trying to keep the rest of herself from falling to pieces. “Who-who are you?” she asked.

“Who... doesn’t know,” the eyes blinked for a moment then started to well up with tears. “Doesn’t know... who you doesn’t know. Can’t know. Why?” A thin barely visible outline started to begin around the eyes, resembling a little boy. “Why? Why? Why?” he started to sob, falling to the ground in the exact motion that she did previously. “Sorry, doesn’t know. Sorry... Sorry....”

She stood for a moment looking down at the violently trembling child. Her own eyes felt bleary, but the tremors had subsided for the most part. “Are you, alright?” She had never seen him before, not in all of the billions of years that she had been here, nor on any of the planets that she traveled to. So, how?

“Doesn’t know- Why!” he cried, now a compressed bundle of invisible limbs on the ground. He looked so pitiful and small underneath all of her creations.

“Hey, hey, hey...” she said softly, kneeling down beside him, rubbing his shoulder, trying to calm him down. “Don’t cry, okay?”

“Don’t cry?” he asked, unfolding slightly, sniffing. His huge eyes stared back up at her, slightly unnerving in how vibrant they were compared to his surroundings. Lavender pupils sat in the direct center, surrounded by countless other circles of color. With how disheartening and terrible they were, she couldn’t bring herself to stop gawking. They were almost akin to a differentiated core of an asteroid.

“Yeah...” she finally tore her view away. “Tell you what! You can come to my home, and we can figure it out from there, okay? Doesn’t that sound good?” She tried to smile, but felt like she was failing just like the planetary jumpstart.

“Home? Why?”

“It's better than sitting out here crying in the wind, no?”

He looked at her blankly. “Why?”

This was starting to get obnoxious, she huffed. She tried something that had always worked on her from her own mother. “Fine. I’ll leave you here then.”

“Why?” he asked again, not moving a single inch.

She was dumbfounded, that always worked on her! “You know what?! Curiosity killed the first star, so no more questions from you!” She scooped him up, stumbling for a few steps, taken aback by the weight. “How are you so light?”

“I’m... sorry” he said, hanging in her arms like lank vines.

“It’s no problem, it’s just surprising, I suppose” she laughed, setting off to her house at a trot. It was almost like the little boy was made of nothing. He certainly looked like he was made of nothing, except for the eyes that stared back at her.

They finally came to the house. Made out of the fibrous brown planks that she had taken advantage of from scraps of the plants that she tended. Two stories so that she could more efficiently divide the space between work and home. It was surrounded by beautiful colors, chosen for their appeal to her senses. Mixes of pinks, oranges, and purples in fleeting leaves and bark. There seemed to still be something missing in the dormant mess.

She stood there for a moment. The boy said nothing.

It wasn’t like she was expecting him to say something, like a compliment or a word of praise or encouragement. But it would have been nice. Nobody will appreciate her work, and only herself... She shook the thoughts away and pushed the door open with her foot.

There was visible dust in the light that streamed through the open windows, whose shutters shook in the wind. Bags mixed with nitrogen phosphorus compounds sat scattered across

the floor, ready to be scattered onto the flora outside. "Sorry for the mess, but I hope it's alright."
Her mother would scream if she saw this.

"Why?"

—

There were so many colors. Colors of all sorts and shapes and sizes. And then he felt sad... he felt sad looking up into the woman's face, surrounded by her robust green curls. There was coldness and then heat and words that he had to keep track of, feeling his voice slowly rise from his insides to reverberate in the air between them. It was slow, certainly slower than his thoughts, but both of them were growing quicker by the moment.

But, when he asked her 'why?' she stared at him, placed him down on a chair, and walked away, mumbling. She came to the table in the middle of the room, collecting the papers that sat idle. He saw pictures coming in and out of view, mixed with squiggly lines pointing to different areas with more of them following down. He wanted to see more of them in their alluring beauty. She seemed to be frowning at them, why?

"Do you have a name?"

"A name?" he echoed.

"You know... something that I can call you by— for example! You can call me Asha!"

"Why?" he said again.

"Well what if you need to know where I am? You just call out, 'Asha!' and I'll come running."

"But why name work? Why doesn't not name?"

She sat beside him for a moment, staring thoughtfully. "I cannot understand a lick of you. Since you can speak, why not normally?"

"Doesn't know."

"Well, that's burning stars of you." She paused, blinking, then added, "For me too."

"For me too," he agreed.

"Still! Names!" The corners of her mouth tugged into a fiery grin. "You need one, and if you don't got one, then we'll get you one!"

"I get a name?"

Asha nodded, her curls bouncing around her face. Her eyes were a gentle burning red, distinct against the silt brown of her skin and house. Everything was so... pleasant, like it wanted to keep him here for all of existence. However, the whiplash was extreme. "So... Eudocia?"

He shook his head.

"Fantasia?" Another shake.

"Clio?" A no, as well.

She continued to give a list of names. Adding more and more. Slowly they descended into gibberish, all congealing together into an incongruent form. A heavy humidity settled on top of him, wrapping him up tight and snug, lulling him to fall into unconsciousness. The light outside went to a dim orange, to dark purple. He settled his head onto the table. The words that she was speaking became mumbling, winding over him like the warm wind that they had felt earlier. "Howabout Simon?"

"Si-mon?" he tested, trying his best to keep awake. The syllables felt blunt and dull.

"You finally speak!" She mused, giving him a tired smile. "You like it then?"

"Mm..." he drifted, tired after all this bumbling, closing his eyes in defeat.

“Going to sleep?”

“I dunno what sleep is...” he said softly.

Asha chuckled as he closed his eyes for the night. Like an echo in the darkness he saw, he heard, “Goodnight Simon.”

—

Asha watched him go out into her garden, the blades of red moss and grass visible through the slightly tinted silhouette that was his body. How long had Simon been here? 7 days? 30? She couldn't quite keep track, but that was what was the norm after all. Why would a person with an infinite span of time, need to keep a hold of an amount? Still, it'd be nice to do so. She turned back into the house and shivered.

She could go back to her desk and look through the mountains of ideas, settling on something new to create. To take a wire and ribbon to clay, however, even that felt bitter and tangy in her mouth, like the hydrocarbons that congealed under a planet's crust filled with her dead creations... Work could go burn. To conjoin atoms in energy and heat until it's a garbled charred mess, then crushed to powder.

Asha turned back to her glade, filled with melding colors and tried to focus on where she had last seen her charge. He was so hard to see because there was nothing to distinguish him apart from that very light lavender tint on the area surrounding him. She was sure that he was there, maybe he ran off?

“Ow!” she squeaked, as a tug of pain hit her head as her green hair was pulled. She pulled away, down to see two large multicolored eyes staring up at her. “Now! What have I told you

about sneaking up on me!”

“To not do it,” Simon said softly, shuffling away from her, casting his eyes on the ground.

“That’s right,” she watched him sway from side to side, not saying another word, leaving them in awkward silence. “Did you want to tell me something?”

“Mm!” he nodded vigorously, his large eyes twinkling up at her. She smiled.

“Whatsit then?”

“Is there anything I can do? To help?”

She raised her eyebrows, “Well... I’m not doing anything in particular. Just taking a bit of a break I suppose...”

“But a break is nothing.”

“It is.”

“But I want to do something! Like all of those pictures that you have! To do something with all the tools that you have collected!”

Tools that could do nothing unless the chemical reaction had already started, Asha thought bitterly. “You can take care of the plants. Okay?”

“But don’t they already take care of themselves?” he asked, looking a bit defeated.

She shook her head, avoiding his original question like acid. “They still need to be kept in line. Believe it or not, some of them are quite the unruly bunch. They can fight to the death through chemical warfare!”

“Really?!” His eyes grew wide, the inner pupils morphing into the four point shape that stars did when her view caught glare.

Asha laughed. “Lemme show you what to get.” She led Simon inside, but the thought of returning to work still left a dissolving carbonic pit in her stomach. Bubbles gurgling up, and

erupting into fizzing cataclysms, resolving in her outermost limbs, making them shake and quiver. Almost as unpleasant as the wind.

He wouldn't be satisfied. At least for not very long, she sure wasn't when she was stuck on a barren rocky surface. After he went outside, carrying her watering can on his head, running around the glade, disappearing into the brush, she looked back at her home. What she made into her home.

Fill up your time. Fill it up until you cannot think of anything else. To make the year faster than the day. Where mountains of work sat, there was a river of languish and melancholy roaring throughout. Thoughts of loneliness and neglect and anger and frustration about to be shot at the moment that you fall from that thought of rushing energy. And she was here, doing nothing, looking after an enigma with no mouth and only eyes bigger than a nonexistent stomach. Why breathe, when you don't even need it?

—

“Are there others?” he asked one night, looking up at the bright white box that sat in the darkened sky. “Like me and you? Who exchanges like this?”

Asha shifted in her chair, fingering the pages of sketches that she held within her hands, “Yes...”

“Then let's go see them!” Simon bounced to her side, almost begging. “What are they like? Do they act like us?”

“We can't go see them.”

“But why notttttt...” he whined, clawing at her seat's side.

“Because... my hair will start to turn orange, my skin gray, to slow down till I become immobile! Do you want to be left alone?”

“No!” he shouted.

“That’s why we’re not going then,” she laughed.

“Then why not by myself?”

“There is no way in stars to do that,” she said, tossing a look back to the misty mountain towering over the top of the garden. She looked back at Simon, saying, “And they always come visit sometime or another. So all you have to do is wait.”

“Really?” He asked.

“Really,” she reassured him.

He turned back to look at the great block in the sky. After that she would often find him looking at both interest points for any sign of life, jumping at any sound that might say a visitor is near.

—

“Are you lonely?”

Simon turned that thought within his mind. She asked it that morning as dew dripped from the morning’s fog. He was staring out the window watching the pastel pink balls of fluff that Asha had affectionately named Ripples. They were playing together, tugging and tussling.

What is loneliness? He knew boredom, and he knew it well. He knew the desire to want to do something, so much that he felt brittle like thin pieces of slate. He felt off. Off was the way to describe when he saw her sitting by herself at the table, staring at the cracks within the fibrous

planks that she called a table. Off when he was by himself in the garden, walking off to nowhere, then coming back. Off when he stared at every painstaking detail in bark, needles, and blades.

It was like he was nothing. Nothing in this place of static movement. What could he do? To feel like he didn't exist, well didn't do anything but exist. Something had to matter, he had to matter. Was that loneliness?

He was now here at the white cliffs that overlooked a forlorn ocean. It was as translucent as himself, nearly see-through. Calmness and sweet humidity overhung it, beckoning him to ponder while days and nights pass.

"Simon?" he heard from a ways off. The sound of soft grass being crushed underfoot, as they sent out a chemical alarm to the others.

"Yeah?"

"I thought you'd be out here," she brushed a branch out of the way, revealing her vibrant red eyes, contrasting to the other more muted colors "Beautiful, isn't it?"

"Mm."

The duo sat for a moment in silence. "You didn't answer me earlier. Just silence."

He shifted, watching a tiny wave crash upon the grainy shore far below. "You are important."

"Not really."

"Yes, you are!" He turned away from the sea to look at his guardian. Her face was hiding behind the brim of her floppy straw hat, tied with a sky blue ribbon, fluttering in the sea breeze.

"You've created all of this, what have I done?"

"You've watered and kept it in check."

"But I haven't done anything like you. I want to be like you. I want to create something

like you rather than look after it. I want to not be useless—”

“You’re not useless.”

“Yes, I am. I am bored. And you stare at the tools in your house and the hunks of clay in thought, then turn away to do something else. You have piles and piles and piles of books and journals filled with notes of things I don’t even know. And you’ve done so much.”

“You wouldn’t want to anyway—”

“I do though!” he said, looking up at her. She looked uncomfortable, shrunken. “I want to help you. And not be bored.”

Asha was quiet for a moment, her brown face turned a little bit grayer than before. “I’m—I’m sorry,” he murmured.

She shook her head. “It’s hard. You never know if something will work or not. And it takes millions, or billions, of years to get where you want. Do you really want that?”

“I—”

“Well, do you?” she seemed to tower over him, glowing balls of fires sat within a sea of white set into a dark face.

He seemed to stumble for a single moment, caught himself, and said, “Yes!”

“Well, let’s go then,” she turned to walk back into the garden.

“Right now?” he squeaked, bounding along beside her.

“What better time than now?” She smiled, looking back at him.

—

The light had faded from the sky, leaving a dark purple and black backdrop against the

light gray clouds, muted, matte, and fluffy. Leaves and leaves of floating drawings sat on the table, full of scribbles and notes. Asha had decided to take the tirade route for lecturing, leaving Simon slightly dazed, the stream of chemicals and optimal conditions quickly flowing from his head. After a point, his forehead slammed into the table, staring out into the distance just as his guardian did.

His gaze fell upon the heavy set bookshelf, stacked with sketchbooks, leaves of paper nearly falling out of the bindings. Looking to its top-shelf sat two pictures, neatly and more pristine than anything else in the house. On one side was a person that closely resembled Asha apart from the different color palettes. Her skin was the color of ice, mixed with dark red and yellow ochres, her white-gray hair floating and fuzzy around her face like clouds. Two voids were placed in her face, filled with bright, faint dots. On the other was a person whose face was entirely disguised by a black mask that formed a beak. Two bright blue eyes stared out from dark holes bordered by rings.

“Who are they?”

“Hm?”

“Up there on the shelf,” he asked.

Asha pulled her view from nothing and focused, “They’re Lucas and Charles.”

“Are they the people in the moon and mountain?”

“Mm.”

There on the bookshelf, they sat far away as the places where they supposedly lived. He was too short to reach them, and Asha, perhaps, too apathetic. They looked domineering, scary, frightening, and most of all cold. So different from where they sat. What did the word *cold* mean when applying it to someone he’s never seen? The ideas spread over his mind like a gradient,

becoming more opaque with the more interesting thoughts pooling out like neverending springs.

But maybe his ideas were different from reality! Maybe they were really fun people like Asha, and would play with him and chat. Even if that train of thought seemed to be 2-dimensional it was more warming and happy. He shivered, closing his eyes. And, as she had said before, they'd be here soon to say 'hi'. So just be good, and wait a bit longer, no?

Chapter 2

“Above the garden is a white box. There she sits, The Creator, upon her gilded throne within a brilliant white monument. All inside has order and strict lines of code. Above the crown of her humanoid head sits systems of planets and their respective stars and satellites, and sometimes it was switched out with the beautiful halo of an event horizon of a black hole. Within her cold Stoney hands, her rules and controls lay waste to countless creations as time cycles by. How much I rue her actions to this very day!”

—The Observer

Dull clouds had collected when she came. Simon was making his rounds, checking up on the flora, accounting for acidity and moisture in the soil. Whether the temperature was suitable. Making sure there were no wars being started between neighbors and so forth. The humidity had started to rise, and heat waves and alternating brittle cold. Quickly, he jotted down notes and made his way back to Asha’s home, needing advice on how to take care of everything.

A loud crash could be heard with a strike of white light as he ran down the path, nearly tripping over the fluffy ripples as they made their way for cover. Finally, he barreled into the glade to see a large person with fluffy white hair, billowing around her face. A halo sat twirling around her head, looking towards the house. He stopped moving, staring at her in reverence, and only then did he hear Asha’s voice in the midst of the gusts of wind.

“You could have not done that, mom.” There was a slight wavering to her voice, she brushed her green hair from her face.

“I sensed something was off. I was worried.”

“You could’ve just knocked on the door,” Asha argued

The woman ignored the statement. “I came to see that planet you were so interested in, and nothing has changed,” she said, stepping delicately onto the grass as if completely weightless. “Why didn’t you come to see me?”

“I was busy.”

“Busy with what? *Busy* with your projects?” She asked, pressing forward. Simon could see Asha starting to slightly shuffle back, trying to put space between them. “You need to tell me when things don’t work out, so that I can continue with my own work! Not to just *dip out* on me, so what were you *busy* with?”

“I-” Asha had started, her voice cracking. “I was busy with-”

“You’re making her freakout!” He finally spoke up, running to the duo, to Asha’s side.

Simon braced himself for something, but there was nothing but silence. Even the wind had stopped to leave them with a serene, jittery calm. Opening his eyes, he looked to see the woman’s now cracked face, red lines etched into the pristine white and blue surface. The crevices started to bleed, the outside pooling forth, and dripping onto the grass with a sizzle and flame. Looking closer, he saw that it had turned to pure black coal. He hugged himself closer to his guardian.

“*Who?*” the words rasped from the woman’s lips like ice sheets scratching together.

“*Who* are *you?*”

At that moment, he felt like he had lost his voice, searching for it in a race to answer, he

heard instead, "Simon. His name is Simon, mom." He turned his view to Asha, to see her face hardened, although he could feel the shaking vibrating off of her.

"Is *this* what you were *busy* with?"

"Yes-" Asha croaked, her red eyes dimming to a low burn.

"*Why* didn't you *tell* me?"

"I-"

Lucas stared at her, starting to say, "5. 4. 3. 2-"

"I kept bugging her!" Simon squeaked. "That I don't know anything and wanted to help!"

"Nobody asked *you*-" The woman's face broke further, more red blobs falling upon the grass, a small fire sizzling in and out of life. The chaotic humidity had returned, wind whipping between them, begging to be fought with. "Nobody cares-"

"I care!" Asha shouted. In that moment, the mayhem collapsed. "I care alot. And I'm sorry that I've been busy, and I was extremely upset that you were right, like always." Lucas stared at her, the glowing etching fading slightly to a dark black. "And I care about what Simon says, and I won't stand for you yelling at him."

The air hummed. "Hey, hey, buddy, why don't you head inside for a moment while me and my mom talk?" Asha asked, shuffling him off of her, pushing him towards the patchwork house. "We will be right there, soon, okay? Why not practice creating or something?"

He stumbled as he was pushed forward, then casting a glance back at the two women, he followed the orders.

The door creaked open and shut with a hiss. He stopped and listened to the conversation outside.

"Creating?" Lucas hissed.

“Yes, he was getting bored and lonely.”

“Who cares if its getting bored and lonely, what matters is that you didn’t tell me it existed! Even Charles would’ve known better!”

“I couldn’t just leave him alone, now could I?” Asha argued.

“I bet you went off to another one of your planets to have fun, or to work on other shit.”

“Like burning I would.”

“Then you should have told me that too! Ash-”

“Mom.” There were no more words spoken for a moment.

“It needs to leave,” Lucas said.

“He stays.”

Another pause. He felt the breath leaving his body as it shuddered against the door. She needed him out there, to fight the mean lady. The lady from the picture was supposed to be nice, right? To one day play with him? So why did she fight with Asha?

“He is going to cause trouble. He’s not good for you,” Lucas tried again. “And you know that I’m right.”

“That you’re always right,” Asha reiterated. “But he makes me smile, especially when you aren’t here. It’s lonely down here by myself.”

“You could have Charles come down-”

His guardian laughed bitterly, “You would smite him if he ever stepped foot in my garden.”

Another pregnant pause sat between the two of them. “Fine,” Lucas said flatly, all emotion seeping away to more useful places. “Just don’t say I didn’t try.”

There was a woosh of air, then a thumping on the ground. Simon creaked open the door

to see Asha sprawled on the grass, her hat covering her face. Her chest was heaving back and forth, trying to get breathing under control.

“Asha?” he whispered.

“Mm?” She lifted her hat from her face, trying to look towards him.

“Are you alright?”

A heavy sigh escaped her, the grass around her moving as if in tandem with the air leaving her. “She means well.”

“Lucas seems mean,” he said, stepping onto the glade, kneeling down beside her.

“She can be that.”

They sat there for a moment, the tension still hanging solidly in the air, but finally breathing was allowed.

“What’s a mom?” he asked.

She sat up, stretching both of her arms in the air as she said, “Moms... are people who care about you. Who make sure that you are in a clean and livable environment. Often wanting the best for you but tackle it incorrectly. Who welcome you and are scary at the same time.” She turned towards him, her smile glittering in the sunlight, “That’s what a mom is to me.”

They sat together, a light breeze picking up between them. “Hey, Asha?”

“Yeah, bud?”

“You’re my mom.”

—

The light was fading from the sky, and a chill started to settle upon the house. Asha

looked down at her work, a small piece of white cloth coming together on the miniature loom. It was sturdy and harsh, but would work for her purposes. Unhooking the guide threads from the top and bottom of the loom, she clipped them and knotted them together.

“Simon?” she called. There was no answer. Maybe he was out into the garden?

Taking in a breath, she scooted the chair from the table. Taking a look out to the glade, there was no sign of life apart from the slowly gathering piles of pastel pink fluff from the ripples. She called out again, “Simon!” Still nothing.

Maybe upstairs.

Clomping up the stairs, she came to the small door, slightly open, letting out a small peek of lavender light into the hallway. Opening it, she saw him laying drowsily in his hammock, his small fists full of multicolored utensils, drooling onto his hands, too tired to move. Across the floor were tons and tons of sketches, typically amorphous blobs with organs hanging in free floating plasma. He had taken to heart what she told him about starting small, that nothing big was created in the blink of an eye. It just wasn't the name of the game.

Asha stepped gingerly over the pictures till she towered over him. His eyes were completely closed and his purple silhouette was fading into the same darkness that was slowly taking over the room. “Simon...” she said softly, pushing the hammock slightly.

“Mmm?” he mumbled, “A little bit more, I'm almost there...” She tilted her head down at him.

“You stopped drawing a while ago, buddy. And don't you want to see your present?”

“Present?” he said groggily, rubbing at his eyes. “Whatsa present?”

“Something for you,” she hummed. “It will be quick, then you can go back to sleep.”

“Okay-” he spilled onto the ground with a hollow thump. “Ow... Whatsit?”

“Close your eyes~”

“Why?” he objected, looking up at her.

“Its a secret~” she half sang, kneeling beside him. “So, please?”

“Fine...” he said, closing his jawbreaker eyes.

“Thank you~” Asha put the ribbon around his neck, pulling it together into a knot, then folding it into bunny ears, pulling them through. “So very handsome, no?” she said, tugging at the ears of her work. She stood back up. “Alright, open your eyes.”

He opened them, and looked down. “What is it?”

“It's a bow,” Asha smiled, turning back to the door. She looked back at him, admiring her craftsmanship. It was a white, nearly iridescent bow tied across his neck. Its two tails draped delicately over his chest. “Hope you like it?”

“Its beautiful,” he gasped. “It's just like the one on your hat!”

“And now we match~” She gestured to the red bow that adorned the side of her sunhat. Asha adored the sound of his voice, how it reached those high pitches that seemed to glimmer in the air. It almost felt like everything was right in the world, and now it kinda felt like she was actually a mom. She figured that a parent should always share something with their kid, no? Even if it was a small accessory.

—

“Since you’ve perked up, are you awake enough to eat something?” he heard her ask. Simon looked down at the bow with its pointed tips and rounded ears. It was adorable and sweet, matching his mother’s style.

“Yes.”

“Alright then, should be done soonish, so come down, okay?”

“Okay,” he said, then the door creaked shut followed by the soft thudding down the stairs. He held the coarse ribbon in his translucent hands, the white turning to a light purple between his fingertips. Would he ever be opaque akin to Lucas and his mother? Were they like him when they were younger?

He blinked, looking around his room, now covered by the veil of night. Walking over where he thought his bookshelf should be, he groped for the lamp and pulled at the cord. With a click, light flooded out from the shade. Out from his window, he could see that lonely mountain in the distance over his mother’s great garden, spreading out to the horizon.

Would the person in the mask be mean too? He sincerely hoped not. He hoped that someone at least gave happiness to his mother, and not just Lucas. But from the picture, barely anything could be known. Maybe the person was a hermit up in the mountain, hiding from light and only living in darkness, stooping when he walked forward, crouching out a bristling laugh. Simon shivered from the strange imagery, picking his way across the sketches. Hope for the best, prepare for the worst, and if both the moon and mountain turned out to be mean, he hoped that he would be nice enough for both of them.

—

It was a while since Lucas had descended upon them, and everything had fallen back into a soothing rhythm. He found himself back at the seaside, looking down upon chalky cliffs that faded into white sand and gravel. The light from the sky once again moved towards the

wonderful lavender and dark blue. Simon rubbed the sleep from his eyes, stretching to a nonexistent yawn. He raised his hand to the sky, feeling happiness bubble up to see that he matched in color.

Delicately, he picked up his sketchbook, filled with the notes from today's caretaking. Drawings danced in the margins, waiting to be put into practice the next time his mother brought out clay and her sculpting tools. Not much had been done yet, but there were small details that lined up during meals or passing by remarks. Like you can't just have a massive creature in a barren landscape. There is a need for metabolism, and for that you need sustenance, to pull energy from the environment, and the ability to self replicate or to recreate another. No one liked being lonely even on his mother's planets.

Simon supposed as he made his way down the brambles and flora that they were not lonely. However even now, there felt like a tangible disconnect between communication and emotion. His limbs swung forward into a stumble, thinking about how he was different from Asha and Lucas. Perhaps even the man in the mountain. He didn't look like them, he didn't seem to share their anger and slow, but more loaded energy. Rather that it was more bubbling forth, pouring out question after question that seemed to be annoying and upsetting after a time. A wave of melancholy seemed to hit him. He'd have to ask mom how to solve this sort of feeling, not that it felt terrible, but more that it felt uncomfortable, like being dipped into water as it swallowed him whole.

Maybe all he needed was sleep. The grass was soft underfoot and who knows, by some miracle maybe he'd be like his mother and her own mother. Maybe even like the person in the mountain... Simon knelt down to the ground, enjoying the warm breeze pulling away from the ocean, covering him like a blanket. A comforting hug, to swaddle him until he was ready to

continue. Would he ever be able to continue, well, yes of course. For his mother, to learn and be curious, but for now... sleep.

—

The grass died at Charles' feet, turning to a crunchy yellow and brown. It was a pity that he always ruined Asha's work when he decided to visit. Of course, he could've also enjoyed it more thoroughly if it was daylight, but that was when Lucas paid the most attention to the garden. There was no particular delight in getting smited and yelled at.

Of course, nothing good seemed to be happening when he saw Lucas pass overhead, with crackles of thunder and lightning bolts from the sky. He sincerely hoped that Asha was alright. Nobody should have to deal with an overbearing mother. Carefully, his steps avoided all of the brambles and plants, hoping to leave no visible tracks apart from the dead grass. She'd forgive him hopefully. Here in the dark nothing could be seen, so all is well, but then there was that purple light. Wait, no, that isn't right.

He turned his head, trying to mind his mask and the tall reaching trunks of the trees to see a small glowing figure laying upon the ground. There was a white, nearly iridescent bow tie around the little one's neck. Maybe it was a new type of ripple? But it seemed too much like their own form's, with a large torso and four limbs sprouting from the sides, and a head at the top?

At its head, was a knotted tree, its bark thick and gnarled. It was quickly growing, spreading out small dark green leaves, which exploded to small red crowns, then to large round bobbles with stamen turning to brown hair within. He knelt to take a closer look and heard the call, "Simon!"

“Asha!” he whispered. He felt anxiety clinging to him, despite him already saying the mantra of that everything was alright, that it wasn’t Lucas.

“Simon!” he heard her call again, the sound of branches being pulled away and leaves being trodden on became louder. Maybe he should run, to try again another day, to do a better job! But he had already made a path, and panic would make the damage even worse.

Finally he saw that his friend broke through the barrier. She stopped and stared at him. Her beautiful curly green hair draped from underneath her sunhat. How long was it that he had made that? The dead straw, sturdy and workable. Her red eyes glowed in the dark, looking at him, then flicking towards the little one. For a moment, something seemed to click in her head, “Get away from him!”

She swept forward, kneeling down, not giving a care for the onlooker.

“Ash-”

“You didn’t touch him right?” She asked.

He hesitated, before relenting, getting up. “No- No, I didn’t”..

“Thank stars,” she let out a long breath. “I don’t know what I would have done otherwise.”

“Asha?”

“Whatsit, Charles?” she said, hefting up the little one in her arms.

“Who is it?”

Her red eyes peered back at him in the darkness, the purple light underlit her round face. “He’s Simon.”

Charles looked back at the small person held within her arms. Soundly sleeping, not budging a single muscle. His head lulled back in sleep, showing no features. Almost a piece of

blank slate.

“He looks creepy.”

“Rude,” Asha huffed. “Especially from the man who comes stalking in the darkness of night with a black mask and cloak. What could be more creepy than two blue eyes glowing in the distance?”

He started to talk, then stopped, then started again. “That’s fair. It’s just... who is he?”

“Uh... he kinda just appeared one day. You know, like you and me. And I wasn’t about to just call mom in to take care of him, cause who knows what might happen then. So I kinda just took him in, you know?”

“But who is he to you?” he asked, inching slightly closer to his friend.

“He’s Simon.”

“But *what* is he to you?” Charles asked again, starting to get annoyed.

“He’s...” She searched for words. “He’s my little buddy. My kid. Like I am to Lucas.”

He looked back at the sleeping little one. “Can I see him?” Coming a little bit closer.

“Like burning stars you can!” Asha cried, taking a few steps away. “Who knows what you’ll do to him.” Even with a foot between them, there was a visual difference in the green of her hair, shouldering a more yellow tint.

“Oh...” he said, knowingly putting more space between them. He looked away from her to the tree. The bobbles had grown too large and started to thump upon the ground, rolling at the duo’s feet. Their waxy outside gleaming in the purple light. “I understand.”

“Look, Charles. I don’t want trouble with my mother or you, but I sure as my life’s building blocks that I don’t want Simon to be hurt.”

“No, no, I get it,” he said, trying to sound as cheerful as possible. He would be lying if he

said it didn't hurt. There wasn't a new person ever. Especially not here in this weird mini universe. "I just wanted to check on you to make sure you were alright."

"Thanks."

The two of them sat in silence. Wind swept through the branches and brambles of the flora. Awkwardness was slowly building a dam between them, but all that had to be done was to say a word. She was alright, she had a new favorite person in her life. Not like Charles was ever her favorite person, but still, neh.

Asha was the one to break the sound barrier. "I need to go see Lucas tomorrow," he flinched. She continued, "And I don't know, but maybe while she is busy with me, you could come and watch Simon?"

"Are you sure? I could hurt him-" he laughed, feeling slightly bitter.

"Don't you dare try to that attitude around. And, I definitely trust you more than I trust taking him up there to my mother," Asha smiled. What she needed at least another person to be sided with. Someone willing to look after her kid. She was probably half hoping that it would appease him. Unsurprisingly, she was right, it did make him feel better, even if it was just for this moment of usefulness.

"When do you need me?"

"Midday? Maybe?" she hefted Simon in her arms, the glowing light bouncing around her face.

"I will do my best to do that."

"It would probably be best if you came after I left, that way Lucas won't be looking towards us."

"Understandable."

She nodded, turning her head back towards the house. “I- I will tell him to expect you tomorrow, but you should probably get going... Okay?”

“Okay,” he nodded.

They stood in silence for a moment longer, Asha breaking it once again, “See you soon.” She hefted the small bundle of a person in her arms and left.

Charles was left alone in the darkness. The silence shuddered around him. A bobble bounced onto his head and rolled onto the soft ground with a muted thud. Kneeling down he looked at it, the grass beneath his legs already beginning to wither. With a thin gloved finger, he prodded it. Would it also fold to his entropy?

The strange orb didn’t cave in, the skin didn’t begin to wrinkle and gray but instead remained its plump shape. The crown at the top pointed towards the barren sky. The glow of his eyes catching upon the waxy surface, diluting the originally red skin to a sulky purple. Carefully he picked it up, hefting it in his hands. Shortly he threw it upon the ground, wondering if there was any inner reaction. After it broke open it showed a treasure trove of red jeweled seeds gleaming in the melancholic light amongst white flesh.

Pulling his mask up to reveal his mouth, he sucked for a moment feeling juice and small bits of debris release. The freshness of life that had been denied to him for so long... Maybe this would be a different story with this new little one? He chewed for a moment, dropping the remnants of the bobble onto the ground, he collected the others and left, happy with his surprise crop.

“Mm?” Simon mumbled as he felt the slow bounce and wind passing him by. It was as dark as could be, but he felt warm and safe.

“You awake, bud?” his mother asked, he felt her grip become tighter for a moment.

“Yeah,” he murmured, nuzzling into her neck. “What happened?”

“You fell asleep on the job, silly. You made me really worried.”

“M’ sorry,” he said, a spray of yellow light came over them as they entered their glade.

They were back home.

“Just don’t do it again, okay? And if you feel tired, you come straight back home.”

“Yes’m,” they entered inside. The smell of cooked food hit him, comfort and satisfaction were always here. He was shuffled off her arms onto the couch.

“You awake enough to listen?”

“Bout what?” he watched her leave to check a pot, steam arising from it.

“Bout’ plans for the future. About getting out there and making stuff?”

“Bout doing what you do?”

“Mhm. So how about I go talk to my mom tomorrow about getting you your own planet.”

He snapped out of the sleep veiled world. “You want to go talk to her? But she was mean!”

“Well, she means well. And it's my fault for not communicating with her in the first place,” Asha assured him.

“She yelled at you. You didn’t like it,” he argued.

“She would never hurt me. She has her heart in the right place, just doesn’t go about it right. Like keeping me safe.”

“She doesn’t seem to be safe,” he huffed, settling back into the couch, its coarse fabric

scratching against his being.

“You just had a bad experience,” Asha chided him. “And on the bright side, I got Charles to look after you while I’m gone to discuss the terms!”

“Who’s Charles?”

“The man in the picture next to my mother. You know with the mask and blue eyes?”

“Him?” he asked.

“Him,” she agreed.

He watched her dip into the great pot, bringing out large spoonfuls of soup into earthenware bowls. “Do you promise that you are safe with her?”

“Aren’t I supposed to be the one worrying about you? Not the other way around?” Asha laughed, moving the two dishes to the table. “And you should be happy! Think of it as another step to putting your ideas out into the world. Forget the danger and run with it!”

“Will you create with me?” He slid off the couch to join her.

“I-” She closed her mouth. Did she want to go back so soon? She had enough backlog to keep her projects going for a good amount of time. What if she found another dud planet again? “We’ll see. Maybe I can help you with the jumpstarting of yours first.”

He hopped into the chair opposite of her. “Hey, mom?”

“Yeah, bud?”

“What do you do when you feel sad and disconnected?”

Chapter 3

“ She stood before the man who sat with his eyes to the ground.

‘Will you stop saying you love me?’ she asked.

‘I will not’.

‘I have done nothing to earn this. Lest your head to roll upon this sacred ground’.

‘Do as you wish, I will accept anything you hand me’.

She stared at him in astonishment. ‘Liar! Cheat! Scoundrel! How dare you say such a thing on this holy ground!’

‘For when my head rolls on the ground and I arrive in heaven, I will tell my report with glowing review,’ the man said, he looked up towards the warrior queen, his eyes were circles of color, akin to her beloved geodes. ‘Who would I be if I didn’t love all?’

‘You are a fool and naive!’ She shouted, hefting her cleaver in hand. ‘Nobody is worthy of such a task’.

‘Then I am only grateful for your hospitality, for your jail was better than the vast desert’.

‘Silence!’ With a strike, his head hit the ground, lifting up dust.”

- The Musical Queen and The Prisoner

“Simon!”

He squeezed his blankets tighter in his hands, not wanting to upset his hammock. What time was it anyway?

“Si-*mon!*” he heard her shout again, then the rushing of thudding against timber. Now a quieter time with the creaking of the door, “Simon?”

“Nnng,” he turned against his pillows.

“Com’n buddy, time to get up,” he felt her swing his hammock slightly.

“Whhy?” he whined, opening his eyes to look up at her.

“I gotta go see Lucas. So get up and at’em, yeah?”

“Right now?”

“Now,” she affirmed. “Or else Charles will be wondering why he’s at an empty house.”

“Charles?”

“Yes, now I gotta run. But I’ll be back by dark!” And she ran out.

A minute later, the front door could be heard crashing closed. He winced. Staying in bed for a little bit longer, he stared at the ceiling, visible knots and gnarls could be seen in the tightly held fiber. How did they grow to be like that in the first place? Perhaps they started as a singular circle, then more circles came to be in the center, then growing outwards? Then after a certain size, cut down and made into the mismatched planks that made his home.

Simon swung the hammock back and forth, he had never managed to get the hang of getting out of it. Especially when sleepy and listless, so as he predicted, he ended up sprawled on the floor as papers scattered around him, making even more a mess than there was previously. There seemed to be a drain placed upon the world, making things seem faded and aggravating. Tiredness hugged onto every moment, giving him cause for annoyance.

He dragged himself downstairs, blinking at the bright light that flooded into the windows. There was a cup on the table, looking into it, filled with an amber liquid. Sipping it, he enjoyed the herbal notes of the tea. Walking outside, he sat on the porch, waiting for the man from the mountain to appear.

It was peaceful. The rectangular structure in the sky sparkled in the distance and a warm breeze pulled past the cabin. He saw the ripples sitting under the shade of the trees. Some of their pink fur was stained with dark red. How did it get to be like that? Not to mention that they seemed a lot more lethargic than before.

Even further beyond a dark figure could be seen walking forward. No... no, it seems more like running. Before Simon could stand up, the black clothed person burst from the wood. "Asha-" its husky voice called.

As if noticing its mistake, it trotted to a stop, saying, "O-oh, right."

Simon looked up at the man, tilting his head, "You're Charles?"

"I- I am Charles. And you are the little one- I mean Simon, yes?" The light hit the glass in the goggles, small blue sparks held steady in the black abysses behind them.

He nodded. "Was there a problem that you needed my mom for?"

"Yes... um. Follow me to where we need to go, then? Its just a bit ahead, closer to the cliffs," Charles stepped onto the porch, and stepped back into the small trail of brown foot marks that showed his path into the glade.

"Is it bad?" Simon asked as he trailed behind the man jumping from one ochre island to another.

"I... I think its bad."

"But is it bad for me and my mom?" He asked again, feeling a prick of annoyance again.

“Well, I’m sure you would have wanted to try some too!”

“Try some too? The problem is food?” They had made their way past some of the lower laying branches, some of their patchy limbs had turned yellow and orange. Their outer layers starting to chip and peel off. “Did you do this?” Simon pointed towards the damage.

Charles flinched but nonetheless continued down his homemade path, “I did, but-”

“I thought it was only my mom that you couldn’t touch.”

“More like everything your mother has worked on... but I can assure you that no damage is on purpose.”

“Because food?”

“Because of a really special and amazing food!” His guide squawked.

Finally, they had stopped in front of a knarled tree unlike anything else in his mother’s garden. Its branches were low hanging to the ground, each one of them twisting outwards and over their neighbors. At its roots sat a small gathering of the pink-furred ripples, although there were red-stained patches on them. Ruby-colored husks sat around them, white pithy flesh sparkling in the daylight. One of the creatures belched happily.

“See?!” Charles gestured to the fluffballs dozing in the warm afternoon air.

“What’s the problem?” Simon asked, kneeling down to pick up the remains of the ripples’ food. “Although gotta admit, haven’t seen this guy on my check-ins.”

“They ate all of it!” The man cried. Looking closer at the ground, there was a visible circle around the plant where Charles was searching for, what he guessed were, the husks.

Simon stared at him, feeling a tiny bit of dumbfound-mant and irritation, but that was all drive away by just the comedy of everything crashing down on him. A man he had never before met was crying about food eaten by his mother’s bumbling creatures. The giant mask covering

Charles' face, to the shallow brimmed hat hiding even more light. Despite the man touching the trunk, it didn't shrink back, it didn't wither but just stood taking it. Thick gloved hands clawed to reach the small red crowns, with thin stamens at the center. "And it was amazing to have such fresh food. Do you know how you feel when you have had something you have never had before?!"

He couldn't stop the tickling feeling overcoming him. Just the idea of being upset over such a small thing "Pfft. Baha-ha-ha!"

"This isn't funny!" Charles stammered. "It's a matter of serious burning importance! Come on! Grow little ones!"

Simon let himself fall onto the ground, trying to keep steady. "But! But! You're supposed to be a mean person- in this mountain right?!" He gathered in another breath. "And the first time I meet you is because you were upset over ripples eating your food!"

"Yeah?! Yeah! Well next time you are upset about something, I'll laugh at you!" Charles huffed, throwing his foot upon the ground. "Shouldn't you- Shouldn't you have powers like Ash? Make the thing's metabolism explode or something?"

Simon coughed, feeling the laughter and giggling leaving his system. "My mom can do that?"

"Of course, she can! Asha can do anything that she wants! Whether it would be from making beautiful creatures from the smallest single cell to the largest multicellular predator! She is the complete and utter powerhouse of this universe and is a supportive and amazing person to the very best of her abilities!"

He watched Charles go on this tirade about his mother, bouncing from highs and lows with no stopping. His mom was really cool, no? Always seeming chill to a certain point,

although there were points where she commanded respect. But if she could do anything, what would she say to Lucas up there?

—

She laid the silver plate and mallet to the ground, letting it get covered by bright green stalks that carpeted this hill. It looked out onto the calm and clear ocean, not a single cloud in the sky. The white box above her looked forlorn and cold.

Asha stood at attention as she saw her mother gracefully falling to the ground, white robes fluttering in the nonexistent wind. She had always thought of it as show-off-y, but if it made her mother happy, then it made her mother happy, and that overall, was better for everyone. “Good morning!”

“Mm” the older woman nodded, casting her black eyes on the green hill that surrounded them.

They stood for a few moments in awkward silence when Asha finally broke it, “Take us up then?” A burst of wind pushed her to the edge of the cliff, and without a moment's thought, she jumped.

They tumbled into the air, then the duo were lifted up away from the garden, above the mountain. Her green curls falling around her face in disarray, Asha pushed them away, but the wind continued to muse with them. And suddenly, they were at the white box that now loomed above them, cold and lifeless.

With a snap of Lucas's fingers a door appeared into the side of the white box, and stepped inside, mute. Gingerly, Asha followed, feet clapping upon the harsh surface, jagged and well

kept. She saw stalactite-like pillars reaching for the floor, almost to impale the viewers. With another snap, giant gaping holes opened up, letting light stream in, causing the cavern-like structure to almost glow. She looked up to the ceiling to see terrarium-like glass balls filled with clouds of gas, of liquid, or solids floating in solitude, each other carefully categorized and named, never to touch any of its neighbors.

Silently, she followed her mother down the hall, minding the trails of ice and water that patiently buried themselves in the floor. “You- you could really use some color here, you know?”

Lucas turned a void black at her daughter and said nothing. “I- I know that your upset, but what can Simon do? Be unmade?”

“Yes.”

Asha halted. Lucas, noticing that she stopped, turned, her white gaseous hair, floating around her face, ethereal and perfect. Her stone gray face harsh, so much different from her own creations... “I enjoy having Simon around.”

Lucas said nothing.

“Even if you don’t like him, at least put up with him for me!” she continued, starting to feel herself shaking, “Please! He’s the only person that has actually experienced things like me! And- and I need company.”

“You have me.”

Silence. Bringing her limbs to her side, hugging herself, she continued, “No I don’t. You’re here. Not down there, with me, and the living. So can’t we-”

“You have the ripples, you have everything you asked for. You even cover the planets I give you with those things” Lucas stated.

“They- They don’t talk! You won’t even let Char- me create anything with a mind! Just

mindless robots! No one to talk to! I'm not like you! I need someone, anyone to talk to me! So now, I have Simon! And I won't let you talk about him getting unmade!" She took in a shuddering breath, looking back at her mother's motionless face, for a moment, searching for something, some sort of emotion to be present in that hunk of barren rock.

Steadying her stance, casting her eyes away from her mother's and said: " And I— I want you to give him a planet so that he can become a creator like me."

—

Light had started to fade from the sky. Charles had walked him back to the cabin, both of them sitting down on the porch.

"I have questions," Simon said.

"As do I," The man's blue sparks flickered behind the dark glass.

Awkwardness seemed to steep in everything that Charles did. Or maybe it was just no connection apart from his mother. The loneliness and melancholy was starting to cloud over Simon again, no longer saved by laughter and comedy. "When did you meet my mom?"

"I met Ash in the beginning. Or maybe a little bit after that."

"The beginning?"

"When there was pure white... extreme heat and all that. Couldn't see burning all. Not that there was much to see in such a tiny place anyway..."

"What was before 'the beginning'?"

Charles shrugged. "Only Lucas could really know that. So you would have to ask her."

"Oh..." he sighed, leaning back on his elbows, stretching his legs out towards the glade.

“I know that sigh,” the man laughed. “That sigh of ‘oh wait, that person is in my way of learning stuff. And that person is scary’.”

“How did you know that?”

“Cause I have it.”

“Heh, I can’t believe it.”

“Believe it!” Charles argued, “Lucas is the scariest person in the universe. She’s also got Ash under her thumb, for that matter, and that can be even more worrying. Both of them are amazing creators. But Lucas... Lucas can create planets and stars with the crushing pressure of her palm. Without her, none of this,” he gestured to the garden, “would have been possible. Stars, I probably wouldn’t be doing anything either for that matter. But burning stars can she yell.”

“What happens when she yells?”

“Well, she can destroy all of your’s, and your mother’s work in the blink of her eye. And of course, that makes more work for me in cleaning up. Imagine that you will have to start from zero just because you pissed someone off?”

“Isn’t that a bit unstable?”

“Yeah... but we can’t get anywhere without her, so just gotta deal, yeah?”

Simon nodded slowly, but felt like agreeing wasn’t entirely the answer. “Someone should tell her off.”

“And who would be willing to do that?” Charles laughed. “I don’t think you or Asha are planning on making anyone new with a spine, right?”

“Would that work?”

“You think I know? Lucas and Asha of course both stand on the idea that you should only interact in the beginnings of evolutions + jumpstarts, but stars it would be fun to interact with the

creatures afterwards, no?"

Simon looked out at the glade, the light had gone from the sky, dark fluffy clouds slowly drifting by. "Maybe..."

A small figure emerged from the border. "Mom!" Simon called, jerking to a stand upright position.

"Ash!"

She waved her hand, her hat covering her face. Did something go wrong with her meeting? Simon ran over to her. "Was it alright? Were you safe?"

Asha said nothing, continuing to sweep forward. Charles stood up, a black splat against a vibrant red and purple canvas. "Mom?"

"Glad to see that Lucas didn't follow you, or else I would have been as good as dead."

"Everything went well?" She asked, stepping onto the porch.

"It did. Best you go sooner rather than later."

"Mom?" She looked so cold and distant, did something happen? Did Lucas scare her into submission? Did they fail in acquiring a planet? They could always try another time, but still!

"I understand," Charles said, padding back onto his small brown footprints, an audible crunch could be heard. "See you soon, then?"

They were just going to separate like this! Awkwardness and tension roared their ugly heads, "No!" he shouted, bouncing off the porch, running towards Charles.

"Simon!" Barked Asha.

He had already linked his arms through the man's legs. "Little one!"

"You can't go yet! Don't you want to know the answer too? If you said my mom can do anything, then don't you want to see what she achieved!" He yelled.

Charles stared down at him in disbelief. His mother stood stark still. Was there no life to be shared between them, how about a non-disproving comment? Please just anything! Anything at all?!

Finally, the man spoke, "Ash?"

The woman sprung back to electrifying thought, a thin smile on her lips, "Yes! Yes, you got the planet, just some terms to go over. Some stuff to think about."

"See? What did I tell you? Your mother can do anything! Even rustling a planet for you from the old white tyrant!" Charles was beaming down at him, the same energy that he had earlier when going on the tirade of compliments. "And I'm sure that anything Lucas has to say you can do just as well against it!"

"You'll be back soon right?"

"With you and your mom being my favorite people in the world! Of course!" He flicked his eyes up to the lady of the house. "That is if it's alright with you, Ash?"

She laughed, leaning against the porch's post, "As long as my mother doesn't see you, and you're more careful when coming in, then sure. Come'n bud, get off of him, yes?"

Simon reluctantly removed himself, making Charles stumble a little, but caught himself upon another decaying patch of crunchy grass. "I'll let you two talk it out. See you soon."

"See you," she said curtly, gesturing inside to Simon, "Let's go inside, okay?"

"Okay..." He nodded, coming back to the cabin, by his mother's side. As she headed inside, he watched their guest tread back into the forest. A small pang of pity shaded the night sky.

He found his mother standing over the table, looking at the spilled drawings that he had gotten out to show Charles. "You need to start with more single cells. Shelve these until later,

okay?"

"Got it. Did everything go okay?"

"You also need to think of some more water-viable forms. Of course we'll get to the experimentation portion, but a moist, or better yet, completely liquid area is better. So just keep it in mind."

"Mom?" he said, pulling at her, only for her to start walking over to the tall bookshelf, taking out a few choice books.

"I need to brush up on the basics as well, so let's think of this as a learning experience for both of us."

"Mom," Raising his voice a little bit more

"Well, it's not really a learning experience for me, but just a small bit of review really. But, hey, everything should go well."

"Asha!" He shouted, shocking her out of the information dump. It might have been a little bit too loud.

"You don't have to shout, Simon. I can hear you."

"You were ignoring me."

"I-" Come on, please tell me what is going on. Please, mom. "I'm just tired after talking with Lucas, okay? A lot to think about... I hope you can forgive me." She took out a chair from the table, slouching to the point where she resembled melting spore mold. "I want this to be as smooth as possible. And that it will be enjoyable and fun. And that I need to do this right because, burning stars, I want you to like it!"

Simon stood, watching her green curls fall slowly from the head of the chair, hanging like a waterfall of vines. It was a similar scene to when he was talking with Charles outside, asking

questions, and getting nowhere.

Walking over, he intertwined himself in her arms, holding her tight. "I will like it, mom. I promise."

"I know you will, bud. I will make it so."

Chapter 4

“On the first stage of planet earth, the skies were orange, clouded by hydrocarbons and poisonous gas. That is how it would stay for billions of years, only to be lifted by the abiogenesis of the 1st green algae, or its ancestor, to fill the promising new world with oxygen and blue skies.”

– A Science Textbook

“So which one do you want to do?” Asha asked, pulling a series of bottles into a drawstring bag. “Sea vents, tide pools, or seasonal lakes? Or are you more of just a giant ocean kind of a person?”

“What’s the difference?” he said, looking out at the chaos that took place on the living room floor.

“Well, it depends on how you want to collect all the nutrients. How extreme are your seasons? How hardy do you want your starter to be? Do you need anything that some environment has more readily available? Just all that sort of stuff.”

Picking up a piece of paper, he looked at the formulas of different elements. “The basis for cellular life is for protection in the form of a cell wall or membrane, then to have instructions for metabolism and replication.”

“And you just need to figure out how to get there, if you get that far at all,” Asha swung the bag over her shoulder. “You need to get the amino acids dissolved and ready to conjoin, then to have electricity and chemical reactions for them to stick together.”

“And how long would that take?”

“Oh, like a gigantic amount of time. But you’ll be busy with prepping other stuff if your hopes are actually correct. Creating all those future creatures, or at least just thinking about what you want. Ready to go?”

“That sounds like so much,” Simon followed her to the door. “How’d you manage this all the time?”

“Practice, patience, and lists... millions, billions of lists of ancestry branches and formulas. The trick is to be organized.”

“You aren’t organized,” he said, the brown patches of grass still present from when Charles came to visit. The man still hasn’t returned back yet.

“And thus why you should do as I say, not as I do,” Asha strode ahead, adjusting her hat against the light. “You don’t need to know where you want to start immediately, just try to keep it in mind.”

“Like how I need to make compromises with Lucas if I want to keep my planet. And to follow your instructions?”

“Exactly,” she said, they went into the glade. They passed ripples, which had managed to garner more mysterious red stains.

“Do you know how they got like that?” He asked.

“No clue, but we will figure it out when we get back, okay?” Her voice sounded a little bit strained, was she feeling alright? Was she ready for this?

“Did you take a look at the plant that Charles showed me?”

“I did, bud.”

“It's weird.”

“It's definitely different from my style. And, I can't really remember it, but hey that's what happens when you create so much.”

“But if it's so different then surely it would have stuck in your memory!” Simon argued. She shrugged, they came to a vast hilltop, a little bit away from the cliffs. At the top was a small metallic sheet and a hammer that resembled the ones that his mother used for sculpting. “Or what if it just spawned out of nowhere? Like you and Charles!”

“Did Charles tell you that? That we just spawned out of nothing?”

“Well if you were here at the start of everything. How do you know if there was anything to start you from before? It could have just been nothing,” he piped up, running alongside her.

“I'm afraid only my mother would have the answer to that.”

“Your mother seems to know everything... how can a person live like that?”

“Well, I don't know if she knows everything, but she knows a lot. And she lives like you and me.” She kneeled on the ground, correcting his crooked bow. Her hands shook despite her steady posture and demeanor. “And you will be polite to her, okay? She is doing a great favor for you, and you will be on your best behavior. Yes?”

“Yes, mom.”

She smiled, patting his back, “That's my bud.” She took in a breath, taking up the metal plate and hammer. “Okay, I want you to watch me in case you need to do this yourself. Focusing, Simon?”

“Yes,” he reiterated. There was a distinct feeling of not being here. Anxiety and surrealism came off Asha in waves, affecting him entirely. It was almost like he could nearly float and dissolve into nothingness. Avoid seeing Lucas by running away.

“Okay... 1. 2.” She readied the hammer, raising it above the metal plate. “3!” The strike caused a resounding crash, echoing and slowly fading back into the wind.

A question popped up in his head, “But what if she’s being mean!”

“Shush! She’s coming!”

Sure enough, a white figure was dancing against the breeze. Her grey tunic was vibrant against the empty pale blue sky. Her hair was pulled at by the wind, releasing miniature clouds of gas that dissolved into the air. Asha stood up, waving towards her mother. “Mom!”

There was no welcoming smile on that stone-gray face. The still visible black cracks where she was last angry made her look upset and frigid. Simon backed up, gripping Asha’s pants.

His mother hissed, “Come on! It's fine!” Kicking her leg to shake his hands off of her.

He said nothing, watching as the woman drew to a stop, a little bit off the edge of the hill. The air around her growing cold and sterile.

“Asha,” her gravelly voice crawled, unearthing itself from somewhere dry and hostile. Simon shivered.

“Mom, all is ready and set to go?”

“Of course.”

“Awesome, let's go then!”

In that singular moment, the hill and his home had vanished into a dark abyss. Millions of dots swung around them, barely moving at all. He quickly looked to see if his mother and Lucas were in front of him, and sure enough, he could see Asha laughing. “It's been so long since I’ve been out! Isn’t it amazing, bud?”

“Yea-h,” There seemed to be no sound coming from her, but it was just there. Burnished into his, or possibly, his companions’ minds. He felt a weightless sense in this void. The lights in the distance flickered yellow, red, and orange, some fainter than others. He looked towards Lucas’ face only to see the smallest, tiniest smile to be present. All the stress that was typically held in her shoulders and posture, vanished just from this single change of space.

“Is it alright if we stop by one of mine?” His mother asked. “Just the closest one should be good!”

Lucas nodded, and in another instant, they were above a great pink sphere. Purple and white-tinted clouds slowly carried over the surface. Were all planets like this? Round and pastel? Or was this just his mother’s style?

Before he could finish his thoughts, they were already descending, the air growing from nonexistent to heavy humid fog. When touching down, there was an audible squish to the mulch beneath them. There was a quick pattering of squelches, he could hear his mother laughing and running away. She spun, lifting up the thick clouds of water moisture. She careened through the dark purple landscape, so flat compared to back home, falling flat on her back giggling.

Lucas stood beside him, a stark standing stone pillar against life herself. The greys and dull reds of her clothes clashing with the pastels, and once again, the smile was gone, replaced with an inset look of indifference. “She looks happy,” he said, half hoping that the statue wouldn’t talk to him.

“She is,” the stone woman said.

“You don’t seem happy,” he said, flicking a cautious glance toward Lucas.

To this, nothing was said.

The sound of water rushing down streams and fauna making alien croaks and chirping caused a chorus that was strange in his stranger's ears. There would be other life forms other than ripples... There were great amounts of plants taking and recycling nutrients from the soil. They didn't need to be manicured or inspected on a regular schedule but rather were built for such a place. In that, it was brilliant. Off into the distance he could see his mother dancing, her blue overalls and green curls vibrant against the purples and pinks that made up the environment.

"Simon!" She shouted, her voice still coming across clearly despite the raucous of noises. "Come over here! I found some of my creations!"

"Coming!" he called back, taking one more glance towards Lucas before running to his mother, thankful for a change of pace.

"Look at these!" In her hands she held a gray-red rock, its bubbled surface told of a harsh history. It was not unlike the discoloration upon her mother's face. Beneath it were a few angry creatures with paddle-like tails, six limbs, and heart-shaped heads. The nostrils atop the heads flared, and their sharp-toothed mouths let out high barks, slapping the ground with their tails. It was almost like a furious dance to ward off scary vibes. "Aren't they cute?"

One of the bigger ones scuttled to the side, clawing at Asha's pants, trying to dig with talons out. A smaller creature hissed, arching its back, trying to protect white opaque orbs surrounded by meticulously placed pieces of aqueous weed that covered this planet's floor. "They look upset."

"They are," Asha laughed, putting the rock back above the small family of creations. "But aren't they cuter like that? Getting all into a fuss just because of us!"

“It must have been scary for them,” He jumped when he saw her studying him. “Not saying that they aren’t cute, because they are, but I think they probably could have done without us upsetting them!”

Surprisingly, she gave a gentle smile, “Knew you were soft at heart. And when you create creatures on your planet, I’ll be respectful, okay?” He nodded. “Lucas probably wants us to go. You ready?”

“Already?” he asked.

“If she’s standing there, instead of floating away or something, it means she’s waiting. Something to keep in mind when you do stuff by yourself.”

“You aren’t going to be there with me?” he felt a drop explode inside of him, traveling further and further beyond, akin to the same feeling when he was falling down to this planet.

“I will be there to make sure that everything is going well. But people are busy, including me. And you are responsible enough already!” Asha got up, dusting off her overalls. He felt his eyes begin to water but nonetheless walked behind his mother, trying his best to keep up with her long strides. But what if I want you to stay with me?

They had lifted off into the void again, speeding along. All energy had left him, but there was a small portion trying to cheer him on. It was going to be great when he could stand alongside his mom in creating things! They would be colleagues! She would be proud of him, and find that it was amazing and brilliant as all of her work! And, she was a busy person, with her own projects and couldn’t just follow him around for it. However, the feeling of melancholy and loneliness stood still.

He tried to make conversation, “What are those lights in the distance?”

“Stars!” Asha piped up, looking pleasantly happy.

“And planets go around the stars?”

“Yep!”

“What do the stars go around?”

“Supermassive abyssal black holes!”

“And what are those?” he asked. It was good to see that she had completely perked, even if it wasn't back in the garden.

“Can we-” Asha started

“No.” Lucas finished. “We've already put too much of my time into this little trip anyway.”

“Yes, Ma'am! I'm sure you'll see one at some point, bud. They have a really cool light distortion effect. Causing everything to kinda arc around them. Not to mention a bombastic history for all of them!”

“Are they really that cool?” He asked, looking at the lights flashing behind them, blurring into wavy streaking lines.

“Yeah! Honestly, Char- I really like them.”

“You mean Charles-”

“Nah! Not at all!” Asha said quickly. “Haven't seen him for such a long time and all that. Seriously wondering what he's up to these days. Do you know, mom?”

“I saw the footprints, Asha. I would prefer it if you didn't lie. Nor teach your pet project to either.”

She opened her mouth, then closed it, her eyes dulling once more from their previously cheery ruby. “Yes, yes, Ma'am.”

What he tried to make of conversation was now a crumbling charcoal husk.

Finally, they entered a system with a yellow star burning brightly in the center, large plumes of fire being released, licking at the innermost planet, already a burnt grey chunk of rock. As they went a ball of pure white, spinning by far more slowly than its more charred cousin, Simon felt small pebbles starting to pelt at him. Before he could complain to his companions, they halted atop an orange ball, thick clouds in the atmosphere, but there were some visible patches of soil below, or sometimes marmalade-tinted water.

They touched down by an ocean, dust lifting up from their disturbance. It was completely quiet apart from the water lapping on the shore, a warm wind blowing inwards to the land. The soil, or maybe just plain rock was a dark grey, with red and brown features. There were black lines along the hillsides, where possible cracks were before they got filled with new material. It was... so sterile, barren, and desolate here. Where was the life and chaos of Asha's planet.

"I'll be back in a day-night cycle," Lucas spoke behind them, already preparing to jump into space again.

"Wait! How long is that?" Asha spoke up, grabbing her mother's leg in midair.

"Not very. It should be enough for you to get your bearings."

"But how long— and she's gone."

Simon stared out at the starting place that he was given. What was he going to do?

"You got a pretty good thing here, you know?"

"What do you mean?" he asked, turning to his mother, who shuffled her bag off her shoulder.

“Well, you have a decent amount of mass, so your atmosphere isn’t just about to run away from us. And the atmosphere is important because it traps all of the water here. Of course, you’ll have some outgassing and runoff, cause that’s inevitable, but the smaller that is, the better.”

“But-” he started, returning to look at the orange sea. “There is nothing here.”

“Exactly. You have a blank canvas to do anything you want to it. We just gotta start it. Don’t you give me that hopeless look right now, it’ll get better. Just takes-” She gestured for him to answer.

“Patience, persistence, and lots of lists.”

“Perfect, bud,” she grinned. She opened the drawstring and took out a notebook and charcoal nub, “And for you to start detailing everything that you’ll need to keep in mind back at home.”

“How much do I need to know,” he opened the blank pages, scanning the horizon for any sort of palpable information. Anything that would tell him something about what he’d create for here.

“Well... how will your creations survive here? What will they consume? How will they replicate?”

“But- that has nothing to do with the actual planet though.”

“It has everything to do with the planet. The planet is where your creations exist. Its a hostile environment that they need to be ready for,” she plopped onto the ground. Adjusting her hat against the soft glare of the star. “You need to get an idea of where you want to get going and find out how to get there. So, what do you want in the future?”

What would he want here? What would he want this world to look like? There was the supposed idea of almost creating an homage to his mother's work. Or even just back home. For him to create what he knows. "Home."

"Eh?" she asked.

"I would want to create blue skies and soft grass. To have trees like the weird one that popped up recently. I want to create comfort for me and you. A paradise?"

She raised her eyebrows, the small red dots that made up her irises burned gently, gleaming. "That, we can do."

—

Asha had sat down, watching Simon scribble furiously into the notebook. It was almost comical to a point, but he seemed to be excited enough to start this project. How long ago was she that excited to start a new planet? Maybe it's because there had been so many deaths, and tragic events, making her start back at square one. To scratch beloved concepts for something that would fit the environment better.

He'd do well here, very volcanically active, still a newly spinning iron core, a hefty magnetic field to protect the planet from solar storms. Why didn't her mother give her something like this when she was beginning?

The stars went out too quickly, vaporizing all of their satellites in a few millennia. Atmospheres were blown off, to reveal a stripped exosphere where water rapidly boiled off into space. Definitely not the best place to create life. She supposed that it was because the universe was still new and bursting with energy and matter in such a small space, quickly expanding. Bigger stars, fewer elements to utilize, and all of that have aged nowadays to be more bountiful and friendlier than ever.

She looked back at her dear star, his purple silhouette strange against the orange skies. He'd have a better time than her, she'd make sure of it. She wanted a better time for herself... just to behold all of that desire and excitement for a new adventure, couldn't she do it again? After Simon is all settled in and started up, she could slip away and start another project to add to her collection, to further all of the other planets that she left paused.

There were terms to be kept from her own mother. All dreary and not welcomed into her mind, and would dampen this wonderful moment. So, maybe it would be better to tell Simon another time? Nobody should have to deal with the idea of death and losing everything at the start of something great.

Part 2: The Ancient Epimetheus

Chapter 5

“ Unstable attachment theory: The idea that a child may be forming an attachment to a parent, not knowing when to expect if something is good or something bad may happen. May lead to unexpected outbursts. Sometimes happens when parents don't give their kids enough attention at a young age, leaving them to feel vulnerable and alone. Effects of this can be seen further into adulthood occasionally.”

- A Psych Textbook

Pond scum slowly formed on the shores, slowly turning to white shards, cracking into new sand, and mixing with the already pounded-in rock that made the majority of the gravel beneath Simon's feet. Under the lapping waves were the beginnings of greater multicellular creations, slowly piecing together through small communities of interleaving cells. Some of them had even begun to move amongst their more stationary cousins. The skies had traded in their orange carbon dioxide atmosphere in place for a more blue oxygen-rich sky, provided by photosynthesis.

Slug-like animals were eating their way through the thick layers of algae that sat at the bottom of the ocean, enjoying a lazy meal. Building blocks in place for a hopefully faster and much more palpable transition to bigger and greater creatures to come. Fluffy clouds, cream with blue shadows, drifted over the gentle ocean.

Simon was here to take a breather, to admire his work, after millions, billions of microscopic cellular development from bacteria, amoeba, to plant cell to animal cell. It was such a long time ago that he couldn't remember if he decided to make RNA first, or metabolism, but at this point did it matter? One came as quickly as another, and now he was here. He could check the acidity of the oceans, monitoring oxygen levels, algae, and the slowly emerging experiments that he had dreamed about from so long ago. A burst of cold wind blew against him, giving into an involuntary shake.

"Hello, little one."

"Ah!" he shrieked, turning around quickly to see the pointed mask looking at him from behind. Two curious blue eyes watched in amusement behind black goggles. "Charles!"

"Admiring your work?"

"Y-yes," he said, how did he get here so quietly on this crunchy beach? "What are you here for?"

"To take stock of what I need to prepare for."

"Prepare for what?" he asked, catching sight of the barren lifeless desert beyond the ocean. It was so unlike what he hoped for in the future. Where was the softness and comfort in that harsh, hostile environment of sharp broken rocks and tumbling cliffs? He needs to ask his mom how she got plants onto land. How did she break out of the water-bounded mold?

"Are you listening, Simon?"

"Huh?" he turned back to Charles, who tilted his head in thought. "No, no I was thinking about future paths to take. Sorry."

His companion nodded solemnly, "Guess we'll talk about work another time since you have other stuff on your mind."

“You haven’t come by in a long time,” he turned to the man, “Why?”

There was a pause, “Well, Lucas is-”

“You two are gossiping?”

“Ah!” The duo looked up.

Above them floated the matriarch, her face stony and ancient with pockmarks and craters.

Simon was silent. “Uh, he-hello-,” Charles started.

“Be gone with you,” she stated. “We are leaving.”

“Already?” Simon asked.

But they were already back at the grassy hill. He saw Lucas for a moment before she was gone once more. He was back home, stumbling on the soft ground, falling towards downhill, and the garden. Silence fell upon everything. His mother had gone to check on her own projects, so this world was empty.

He had managed to convince Lucas to take him to his planet, saying that he needed to check its progress, but there was that honest desire to have a change of scenery. There was no conversation to be had here, no laughter or happiness. All he had to do was wait, as simple as that. Wait for his mother to return, to see her smiling face again. Simon trod down the hill, the ripples playing in the distance, not giving a care in the world. There on the ground sat the waxy red orbs, forever fresh and never-dying in this strange place. Charles seemed to enjoy them.

Picking them up, he made his way back to the patchwork house, its red and purple planks melding together in a homely environment, welcoming him back to a silent kitchen and living room. Placing the spheres onto the cutting board, they were broken into revealing the white pith and red jewels beneath. Moving over to the stove, he opened the base latch. He piled in pieces of small planks that had been discarded from his mother’s smaller projects. Taking a stone and flint,

he sparked it. A cheery flame came to life after a few rough scratches. There was a recitation of information that was lectured to him, that fanning flames fed it oxygen, giving it more energy and expanding its surface area. After he was satisfied with the size, he closed the latch.

Taking a massive pot, he filled it and unloaded all of the red jewels, some of them breaking open to squirt staining juice. Placing the crucible on the flame, the reaction started, ruby liquid seeping out to reveal white dewdrop-shaped pebbles. Stirring meticulously and a good portion of time revealed a gel, full of nutrients and sugars. All of it was coagulated by a carbohydrate polymer, creating longer and longer chains, as the water quickly boiled off in thick steam. Maybe it was sweet enough for someone who already kills for these bobbles.

Carefully, he ladled out the goop into some bowls, the red gel shimmering in the warm light of his home. Taking one in hand, Simon worked his way back to the cliffs, climbing down the white and gray layered stairs to the gravel beach. Under an overhang sat a sizable hole, cool air rushing out of it from a far deeper place. He placed the bowl at the lip of the tunnel, it would be cool by the time that Charles came back. Who knows... maybe the man would come to visit him and his mom to return the bowl.

The crystalline sea lapped at the shore, as calm and as gentle as can be. Underneath it was sterile white sand, lacking any life, multicellular or singular. Taking another glance towards the tunnel, Simon made his way to it, standing by the edge. A step in, the cool tide, swept him against a nonexistent current, the only tidal force being the strange monument that made up Lucas' house.

The water carried him further into the shallows, allowing him to spread out his limbs and catch the sea's breeze. Would his mother come to find him if he wasn't home when she came back? Would anyone worry if he just disappeared from the edge of this surreal world? Simon

could imagine himself as a sore purple point of view against the wonderful blue surface with white waves. Maybe it would be millions of days until Asha returned from her own projects. He could just dissolve into the solution, never remembering this life again.

Closing his eyes, he let the water cart him further away from home.



“Simon!” his mother’s voice called. Sleepily, he opened his eyes, seeing that the sky had turned to a lovely light orange and purple. “There you are!” If he were to turn his head to see where she was calling, he’d lose his balance, completely upsetting the peacefulness of nothing.

Finally, giving in, he flipped in the water, turning to see where she was. Sure enough, the shore was farther into the distance. Asha’s green hair was vibrant against the white chalk cliffs. Clumsily, he worked against the tide, quickly arriving back to the shallows. The cuffs of her blue pants had water stains showing how far she had waded in. She splashed over to him, her smile creating crinkles on her dark skin. “What’re you doing out there?”

“Thinking.”

“Thinking,” she echoed. “Out in the sea? ‘Bout what?”

“‘Bout plants.”

“Oh?” They had turned away from the sea and started to make their way up the gray and white chalk stairs.

“How’d you get them onto land? Away from the ocean?” He asked, thinking about the great red towers that surrounded a good portion of his mother’s garden. Stand straight up into the sky, not giving a care for gravity.

She shrugged. “Depends on the situation.. Like if you want to create a new strain of the green algae to a different one, that would be more suitable for the supposed harsher environment on the surface.”

“Like no protective layer because of the water, right? To stand against the radiation?”

“Yeah, but I’m guessing you don’t just want a bunch of algae mats going nowhere on the shores.”

“Yeah,” he agreed.

“So you need to figure out the same stuff as you were doing the multicellular stuff under the sea, except you need to take gravity into your understanding.”

Simon took in a breath, shivering under the shade of the alien trees. Their multicolored branches and limbs are covered with spines and spikes, others with a fuzzy film. “So like how am I going to transport nutrients from one standpoint to another.”

“Exactly!” Asha clapped her hands, “See! You’ve learned so much already. Soon you won’t need to come to ask me questions!”

He felt like a slug was eating away layers inside of himself, “Yeah... You still know more than me, so not gonna stop anytime soon though.”

“I would hope not, bud!” She grinned.

They exited out of the brambles. The warm yellow lights welcomed them inside. The paisley couches were dusty from nonuse. The kitchen table scratches were full of dried clay and little bits of twine. The bowls of the ruby-colored gel sat on the counter, patiently waiting for when they would come home. “I see you were experimenting with stuff. Just remember to clean up next time, okay?”

“Kay,” he said, taking a bowl, and making his way to the couch to flop down.

Asha peeked from the kitchen, “You alright?”

“Mm. Just tired.”

Her brows knit together in thought. “Did something happen?”

You could tell her that you missed her while she was doing something she loved. That she preferred to do rather than being here with you. She was your mother, and she deserved to be happy more than anything else, and any worry was trivialized against it. “No,” he said, muffling his voice against the paisley cloth. It smelled like stale sawdust and dirt.

“Did Lucas say something to you?”

“No,” he flipped back to his side, feeling his head lull to one side, not really focusing on something.

She stepped into the living room, “Maybe you’re tired. Were you getting enough sleep while I was gone?”

“I don’t need sleep. Sleep is for short-lived creatures of our own making.”

“Sleeping gives you a break in thought. Relaxation in its complete form.”

“Eh,” He said, closing his eyes.

He heard her walk back to the kitchen. She was probably right about the need for sleep. However, said another part of him, there was work to be done. There was planning to be made! How would the plants transport oxygen, carbon dioxide, and sugars, to and fro in their skeleton structure? It was easy in a cell, just put in a recipe saying, hey this protein or amino acid is needed for blank polymer or lipid, and thus was pushed through the microstructure of that microscopic life. It was there and then in the water, with no need for extreme pressure, or a need to deal with gravity. It was infinitely easier.

He could feel better in the morning. He would stop worrying about loneliness in the morning. All of these thoughts would be better in the morning. “Mom?”

“Yeah, bud?” she asked, plopping down onto the armchair, putting a spoonful of the gel into her mouth. She looked so carefree and laidback beyond anything he could possibly imagine. How did she do it?

“Would you miss me if I was gone?”

The branches could be heard rustling outside as he watched her slowly chew and swallow. His eyes felt wet and hurt.

There was that dreaded question that fell from her mouth. "Something did happen. What's wrong?"

"Nothing's wrong!"

"Simon, if something is wrong you need to tell me. Did something happen to the oxygen levels? Or did an experiment go wrong? Or did Lucas scold you?"

"Nothing's wrong! Nothing!" he banged against the couch.

"Simon!" she shouted. The sharpness of her voice impaled him, stark still against the clumsy, colorful, painful couch.

Silence was held between them. He felt a short breath taken in and out of his system, then shaking, then cold leaking down his face. Altogether sobs were breaking out against his will, wracking his body to take any sense of control. There was pain in her voice, and what would he say to her? That nothing was wrong? That everything was fine! That he wasn't overwhelmed? That he was strong and here to support her and wanted to be just like her in everything that she does?! Yet, here he was sobbing, wiping water from his face, trying to cry as quietly as possible. As if it would do any good since she was already watching in shock.

He felt a jump in the height of his seat. "Nooo-o-o-o," he whined, coughing on his own tears. Sure enough, no words were spoken, but he was there in her arms. "Let me go!" he shouted hoarsely, wiggling from her grip to no avail. There he was held firmly in a ball of neverending warmth and comfort.

She said nothing, bringing him into a full-force hug despite his best efforts to escape. "Please-" he begged. "Please- I'm too much. I- I can't figure anything out without you."

"Shushh... You're very smart and can get anywhere without me."

He kept his mouth shut, thinking 'I don't want it to be without you!' Instead, he said, "No, I'm not. I'm overwhelmed by the littlest change from the regular."

She rocked him back and forth, rubbing his back. "That's why we work in the gradual. And yes, you are— you're the smartest person I've ever met. And I know both Lucas and Charles are pretty smart in their own fields."

"Heh," he wiped his eyes, trying for a half laugh. "That's not true."

"It's true for me. Trust me, Lucas can be very stupid at times," Asha assured him, her eyes showing the most gentle color of red to ever exist, like a warm blanket and drink. Urging you to take your time and to only go when you feel completely ready.

"Really?"

"Really."

Her arms felt soft against the harsh world, his bastion against the universe. Against all the hard work that he would be continuing, to possibly win her admiration in the future. For her, everything was possible and wonderful. His mother was truly the most amazing person in the world.

"Why don't we get you to bed before any more sad thoughts?" She swaddled him in her grip, standing up from the couch.

"Did you like my experiment?" he croaked, there was a tightness to his face that he had never felt before. Maybe because of the tears?

"Of course. I'll like whatever you make."

"Even if it's weird?"

"Yes."

"What if Lucas doesn't like it."

"I'll still like it..." her voice ran off with her thoughts, as she clomped to the stairs. "Did you do something that my mother didn't like?"

"No," he said.

"Simon," Asha said earnestly, pressing him closer to her. Her green curls tickled his face.

"N-o-o-o," he giggled, struggling in her vice grip.

"Good," she smiled, "Stars knows what she'd do without me defending you."

"Stars knows," he echoed.

She laid him down in his hammock, "We will talk about this in the morning, okay?"

"Kay."

"Goodnight, bud,"

"Goodnight, mom." She clicked the door closed and he was alone once more. Once again the revolution reached the point where maybe the universe was alright to be in.

—

Asha descended the stairs, her footsteps heavy against the light wood. That emotional outburst was unexpected but was quickly quelled, thankfully. She stood in her home, the windows open to let in a light breeze. Did she ever do that when she was with Lucas? Just bursting out into tears over seemingly nothing? She was sure as stars didn't know, and didn't think her mother would be any more likely to tell her.

Maybe it was burnout that Simon was crying over? Was it that frustrating to not know how to move and make green algae into greater and better things? There were solutions for this, whether it would be for him to step away from his projects for a time, focus on other things. This

house where she stood was created because she got frustrated, tired of the wind from the ocean, and tired of fiddling with the minuscule genetics of her own creatures.

Maybe he could go build his own house? Start his own garden? She bit her lip. Is her little star moving away already? When did she move away from Lucas, herself? Why did she do it? There was probably a very good reason. Coming to the couches, there were tear stains on the paisley cloth. There were ultimately too many possibilities to think through. However, there were some ways to stop the next outburst, to put that emotion and energy into other useful things. Her eyes laid upon the bowls of red jelly, as sweet and as tart as can be.

She still needed to tell him Lucas' terms... but that could be put off to a better time no? After this episode, there was a need for calmness. There was no good reason to bring her mother into this since she and Simon already have a rocky relationship. If Charles ever comes by, she should talk to him about this, and who knows, he might even have some ideas.

Chapter 6

“ Insects came onto land before soft-bodied mammals. Maybe it's because there was more to take into consideration for the internal skeleton rather than our bug's exoskeleton. I am sure that fish were jumping out of the water to catch the flitting flybys. Probably by the thousands of thousands. Good food for anyone who would've been there back then.”

- The Science of Planetary Evolution by Dr Everet Wilson

The stone woman stood in front of him, “Figure this out or you're never coming back.” And then she was gone. Simon stood in momentary shock. The giant ferns above him dripped heavy droplets from the earlier incoming fog. Splish splash went the fish, arcing back into the water, trying to catch the flying insects. Each of their great sections moved with their heavy beating wings, thin and translucent casting filtered sunlight. Crustaceans shuffled along the river shore.

So, he was here, seemingly stuck unless he figured out how to teleport. Or at least some sort of thing like that, because Lucas got fed up with him asking her to go back to his planet. He hadn't been back in such a long time! The last time was when coral was bleaching and ash had filled the sky... where had the ash come from anyway? Plans were tossed to the side in an effort to roll out quick bottleneck adaptations. Not to mention the creatures were extremely small due to the loss of food resources.

So the first thought, build new food resources, best bet is for the green algae to recover first, then the phytoplankton, then zooplankton, to the fish, then to the greater fish with sharp

teeth and heavily armored bodies. Of course, that's just the oceans, but looking back to land... A fire had devastated the area, where the ash plumed into the sky, creating sarcophagi of many plants and animals, their carcasses encased in thick gray carbon and silica.

And after recovering from that whole ordeal, he was left to rot because she said that he asked 'one-too-many' times. He had followed his mom's advice to think about something else... to get back to work when he felt like he was ready. After spending time just lazing about, trying to sketch his mom's work for fun, running around after ripples, even trying his hand at furniture making, he felt like he could come back. Then he was thrown into this burning situation!

How, how in the stars was he going to get back there? Sure, his mom was also out doing stuff, but what about when she comes back? Wouldn't she wonder where he was? What was he going to do before then? Just exist? Well, he already just exists, but still! He couldn't do much here... so either figure out how to kinda space jump, or stay here until help arrives, which would make him slightly embarrassed and hurt his pride.

It was to manipulate the atoms that made up his person... he could remember an offhanded conversation held with his mother...

"What are we?" he asked, wiping the dirt and clay from the table. "Are we made of the same stuff out there?"

She shrugged, as per usual, "Something like that."

"Then why can we move?"

"Maybe its because we're more fluid, the gaseous presence of us is held within the atoms that we pass by."

"Like a shadow on a wall, or light filtered in a cloud?"

“I would think it's like the light. I don't really know about the shadow or not.”

“Then we are projections?” He asked, taking plates from the kitchen counter. Outside the dusty windows, on the grass, a large pile of pink pastel fur bristled against the wind. He could see some of the ripples' beady eyes peering back at the house. “Then how can we interact with things? How can we think?”

“Maybe we have a supernatural power that enables us to use force and to inhabit the forms that we choose~” Asha waved her hands as if casting life into one of her creations. “But I suppose we are already pretty interesting. So best not to think too much about it right?”

“Then what about when I first came to be?”

“About what?”

“Just how was I? How were you when you were first here?”

“I was red. And you are, of course, purple, as you still are.”

“You were red?” He exclaimed.

“Eh, that's what Charles tells me.”

“Then what was he?”

“Blue,” she smiled, carrying a pot to the table. “Now sit down and we can talk about this another time, yeah?”

They never talked about it again, whether it was because they were both busy, or because she didn't want to discuss it further. Simon raised his hand to the sunlight, the purple-filtered light coming through it. He was still translucent, still in this shadow of a shape as when he was first brought into it. Why didn't Asha jump when she needed to go to her projects, but instead asked Lucas for a lift? Maybe it was because her mother never made her do this, he thought

bitterly. Bitterness wasn't going to get him anywhere, and certainly not back home. Not back to his dear mom, who might be waiting for him to return. Might.

He tugged at the bow around his neck, making sure that it was nice and snug. Then he made his way down the riverbank, looking at the small aquatic plants and moss being tugged at by the tide. They danced in the cool water as large bonefish waited in the muddy shallows, readying themselves for oncoming prey.

He could figure out some way for plants and animals to be impervious against fire, against ash. Maybe he could make them so big that nothing could take them down apart from their own neighbors... Giant roaring monsters of different proportions, with a hardy hide, powerful legs to run on land. Flipping his notebook open, the brittle piece of coal sketched out notes, diving back into what he originally desired. How long ago was it?

He looked above his quickly filling pages, to see the great insects, taking in massive amounts of oxygen through their porous exoskeleton. Spores from the ferns collected upon their wings, allowing them to travel as far as possible until there was no moisture to germinate in. There was a size cap on the bugs. There was only so much air that could be taken in at an efficient pace. Not to mention the ability to move around blood from inside the body was dictated by pressure pulling the muscles in and out. What if there was a loss of oxygen?

More ash filling up the sky blocking the sunlight? Or even another anoxic event in the oceans, the destruction of the greatest maker of oxygen, green algae? Sure the ferns were good, but there simply wasn't enough... The moss underfoot, leaching nutrients from the soil underneath was also grand, slowly eating away at the harsh rock beneath. However, with less oxygen, the insect's size would decrease rapidly. There would need to be a different strategy for creating the massive walking giants...

His gaze watched the bonefish heave long breaths, their tiny eyes blinking, looking out for their next meal. The sturdy front fins pushing against the shallow bank, then snapped forward, crunching down on a small flitting dragonfly. Red blood coursed through its veins, muscles pulling at the bones to propel rather than the pressure through arteries and limbs. It wouldn't need to be sustained by gravity, but rather to have the changing of balance and to strengthen the bones inside, or at least have some modification to its bodily structure. Simon tapped his charcoal nub against the paper, leaving black smudges in its wake.

It will survive, it will diversify and spread further than anything else he had ever made... apart from maybe bacteria or insects... or even plants. A spider swung down from a green frond, pulling up a small fish on its thin thread. The miniature fish struggled against the trap, its tail weaving back and forth in the air, flicking off water in every direction. The spindly legs worked against its prey, twisting it in constantly rotating motions, covering it in a beautiful silvery coffin. It would be ready for its insides to be liquified, then punctured and devoured. Life continued, predation constitutes prey, and prey eats the plants, and the plants devour the corpses of the overstuffed predator, oily and bloated against the fungi, moss and bacterium. He stood up, tired of this place already, it was time to find a way home before anyone came looking.

—

Simon still hadn't come back. Asha hummed, pressing a knife hard into a tuber, starchy water leaking out of the cut. Anxiety clinged to her every movement. Lucas wouldn't respond to her request to return to her star's planet. She knew that there were reservations between the two

of her favorite people, but just how far did it go? What if he never came back to her? She might be left all alone again, among a garden of her own creations with no one else to talk to...

She shuffled the red root into a boiling pot of water and sodium. The thoughts hanged upon her limbs, dragging her to a shuddering fall to the floor. He was always here when she got home... she had gotten so used to seeing his smiling eyes and translucent purple silhouette waiting in the doorway. Why couldn't she have learned how to teleport like Charles does? Or even her own mother? All of this could be solved if she just had a little bit more patience to work on something that felt seemingly impossible to her. Stupid, stupid, stupid!

How many days had it been since she came back? To plants fighting their chemical battles and red stained ripples belching contentedly because of the weird waxy orbs filled with white pith and ruby colored jewels. Asha rubbed at her eyes, curling her legs to her chest, a comforting warmth emanating from the stove. She might have just been tired, he would come back soon, because he would never leave her. She closed her eyes, listening to the rapid bubbling of the pot above.

'Knock'

Her eyes flew open, and before Asha knew it, she had sprinted the door, flinging it open to see Charles staring at her in shock, an empty bowl and spoon in hand.

"Oh," her words fell flat against the floor, "Did you want more again?"

"I-" he started, "Yes... but-"

"But?" she tilted her head.

"But are you alright?"

Asha blinked, her shoulders slumping, and the excitement quickly replaced by the heavy tiredness and anxiety. "Eh," She started to walk back to the kitchen, thick steam rising up from her boiling pot. "Come in, I'll get you some more of the gel."

"Are you- are you sure? I can come back later if this is a bad time?" he asked

"No, its not a bad time... its just-" She opened a cupboard to reveal multiple earthen jars, each one holding Simon's weird and delicious experimental food.

"It's just?" Charles echoed, his steps inside creaking against the old floorboards.

"Where's the little one?"

"He's not back yet," The jar opened with an audible pop. The potent smell of sugar and alcohol arose from inside. "Lemme take- I'll get you a new bowl and spoon." He hadn't been here in such a long time, she had gotten careless. However, company was company, despite the tiredness that infected her soul. "Would you like to stay for a bit?"

There was a pause, no movement, but there was a feeling pinned to her back. "Do you want me to?"

"Sure, why not tonight?" She turned to him, trying for a smile, but the aching pulled down at it.

His pointed mask tilted in questioning, but said nothing. He came forward, sliding Simon's chair out from the kitchen table, and sat down. "Okay. Well, um... I have something for you two... I thought he'd be here, but I suppose he can have it when he comes back."

"Oh?" Asha yawned, bringing Charles' bowl to the table. "I'm sure... sure he'll like it." She took her chair, moving it a little bit away from him, then sat down.

"Uh, yeah," he said, he took two parcels from his cloak. He placed the elongated one closer to her. Its beautiful red ribbon shone in the yellow light. "That's yours."

Gingerly, she took it, unwrapping it from its white canvas to reveal beautiful gold shears. Its blades were shaped like beaks, opening its mouth when she used them. Its eyes was a shining carmelion. "Why... it's like your mask."

"I thought it might be useful when you are keeping your creations under control..." he took his hat from his head, and started to unravel the scarf to loosen his mask. "I don't know if its that good, but I thought it was at least worthy of your sense of style."

"Its certainly beautiful," all the energy to show her gratitude was gone. "I'm sorry- I would be more ecstatic, but I'm just-" she waved her hands.

Charles took off his mask, revealing his bone white face, narrow blue veins pumping under thin skin. "Understandable," he took a spoonful of the red goo, popping it into his toothy mouth. His bruised cheeks moved slowly, then stopped after an audible glup. "You're worried."

"Yes..."

"Even though you shouldn't be, because Simon is a capable young person."

"Yes..." she reiterated, sliding back into her chair.

"Why?" he asked, his blacked out blue eyes pinning her up uncomfortably.

"He just recovered from burnout, and before that he broke down." She let out a sigh, pulling her legs up onto her chair. "It was unexpected. One day he was fine, then another he wasn't."

"And?"

"And... I don't know why he broke down. I offered him solutions, like, of course working through it, being busy to forget about stuff, like I normally do. But what if this happens again? Why did it happen in the first place?"

Charles chewed and swallowed. "Maybe you should ask him?"

“He would have told me what was wrong by now. I asked him if it was about Lucas, and he said no... and it wasn't like after an extinction event, because of course that's expected, and he has been able to bounce back...”

“And he has bounced back right? There is nothing to worry about?”

“But what if there is?” She whined, tapping her foot against the side of her chair. “What if something had happened to him and he doesn't come home? What if he doesn't want to come home?!”

“Why would he not want to come home?”

“I-” She started, her mouth quivering, “I don't know... maybe it's because he got fed up with making creatures or working on his project. Maybe he's had enough, that he's satisfied.”

“I don't think he'll ever be satisfied,” Charles said matter of factly, scraping the leftover contents of the bowl.

“No?” she asked meekly.

“With you, as his mother, yourself never satisfied with your work, he'll take after you, always wanting more and more, thinking something will solve his problems, when in fact there is a new batch after that. No...” he wringed his thick blue tongue over his wiry lips. “He'll never be satisfied with his work. Fed up with it sometimes, yes. But forever done? No.”

“Burning stars, Charles,” she laughed. “What would I do without you?”

“Probably be very well off by yourself. And Simon would come home safe and sound, despite whatever you think.” She held his gaze thoughtfully. There should have been sarcasm there, but it was absent.

“You’re probably right,” Asha shuffled off her chair, going to go check the pot. The roots were soft and mushy, a good portion of the water had blown off into the air. “Do you want some more of the gel?”

“That’s a terrible name, you know.”

“It’s what it is,” she smiled, emptying the contents of the cracked brown jar into a new bowl. “Got a better idea?”

“Compote? Since it’s potent? Or maybe jam, because you’re jammin’ it into the pot.”

“I’ll run it by- him.” She flicked a glance over to her guest, “When he gets back.”

“Yes...” His voice ran off into thought. She filled a bowl with the tubers for herself. They were to be tasteless, filled with glucose and starch. Maybe some sodium would help? She was here doing nothing, feeling nagging at bay, asking, praying for her to breakdown.

“Do you want me to go get him?”

Asha looked her friend, sitting at the table, spoon with the red compote in hand, or jam, or whatever Simon would decide. Within the blackness of his eyes sat the blue white of the 1st star, it had died quickly after its inception. She should know, she brought him there in the first place against Lucas’ wish. “I can’t ask you to go do that-”

“But you aren’t. I’m offering,” he scooted the chair back and got up.

“But-”

“But what? You’re obviously worried about him.”

“Will I owe you something?”

“Since when did I ask for something?”

She blinked, feeling her face crinkle as she smiled. “You always were the bearer of gifts. Sooner or later you’ll going to give your soul away.”

“Consider it yours, my dear,” Charles hummed, replacing his mask, head scarf and hat.

“But, I hope to take a few jars home when we return.”

“Of course,” she nodded. “Come back soon.”

“Soon,” he said, then was gone.

Asha blinked, looking back to her quickly cooling meal. Then to the chair that was filled and then abruptly emptied. The wind whistled overhead, the dark cloudless sky drawing a viewer's attention to her mother's temple above, a lonely bright white. She turned back to see Charles' gift sitting forlornly apart from the rest of her tools. Its blades glittered in the yellow light, sharp and graceful.

—

Charles found himself standing above the ocean, land in sight nearby. Invertebrates and vertebrates curled up around the tidal neighborhoods. The rocks were covered in barnacles and anemones, collecting food as it passed by. There were wonderful fleeting rainbows of vibrant fish swimming lazily in the current. The corals sitting beneath him bleached slightly, reacting harshly to his presence. Maybe he would be farther inland...

Traveling to the shore, an estuary system flushed out freshwater to saltwater, never reaching equilibrium. Ferns bowed to him, releasing their fronds in a slow motion dance. The little one had to be somewhere nearby right, maybe further inland?

Giant bugs scuttled past, minding the preying fish, ready to lunge from the mud to the more solid ground. Far off into the distance, the greenery could be seen to fade into a dusty

yellow and brown. Just above the horizon sat a pacing purple silhouette, with his white bow tails fluttering in the wind. Charles blinked, the little one should be on the ground, no?

“Simon!” he called, but still too far away. Traveling closer, he crossed the water line, the river still continuing further inland to burning knows where. Craggy old rocks sat disjointedly amongst the sand and dirt. Some more adventurous critters sat atop them, spreading their wings as a shield against the harsh sun.

He hit the desert beneath, watching the kid circle around and around above him. There was now an audible muttering. “Oh dear...,” he looked up.

“No, it can’t work like that... But- no! But, then again...” A fizzle and crack, then a yelp of pain. “But- but- but-” A notebook was pulled out, its red title page hanging jagged on its spine. The typically long piece of charcoal had been decimated to a tiny stub. Charles shielded his goggles from the glare of the distant star, and coughed. “So, if Lucas can do it, maybe its the matter of speed, but that wouldn’t be instantaneous...”

“Little one?” he spoke up a bit more.

“Then how in stars way does she do it?!”

“Simon?” a little bit louder.

“Just how- HOW Does SHE DO It?!”

“SIMON!”

“SHUT UP!” the kid screamed. “I GOT THIS! I *got* this!” A small dark droplet plopped onto the sand, followed by a few more. “I- I got this.”

Poor little one has lost it. Pity stabbed at Charles as he flew up to join the child. “Its time to go home-”

“I don’t want to go home.”

That remark slapped him in the face, readjusting his foot, he took another step forward to the distancing child. "Ash is worried. She wants you to come home."

His jawbreaker eyes widened, narrowed, then shut. "She'd prefer it if I came home knowing more than I previously did. Like getting home without getting into a fight with *Lucas*! For one thing!"

"What melodrama," he sighed. "I just said your mother wants you to come home. And you think it's better to just stay out here?" Simon said nothing, bowing his head slightly. "Don't you think that maybe she will be surprised by you coming home knowing how to fly? Something she can't even do? And you don't want to come home because you wanted to do it by yourself?"

"Listen, I understand the desire to be impressive, but that can lead to stupid things in the end run. So please come home?"

"no," the little one said. His eyes started to water once more. "I should be able to figure this out! I want to be able to figure this, and not rely on Lucas again. And- and-"

"-And" Charles picked up, "You've been here for days. It would probably take you even more time to try get home. So, just take the consolation prize, and be happy." Asha, I was right. Your son will never be satisfied just like you. "There is something good to be made out of all of this. So how about, we take a walk around. You can dry your eyes, and you can show your mother your new skill?"

The small colored rings that circled the original purple pupils focused on him. The little one's silhouette faded into the background as the sunset alongside the ocean's edge. "Please... please don't try to fight again."

"I-" his high pitched voice wavered, multiple tones chiming within it at once. "Okay."

They touched moss, moving forward on foot rather than testing new, and anxious powers. Simon made no attempt to start a conversation, as Charles didn't either. The night air on this planet was cool and clear apart from the few fluffy clouds circling overhead. Bright and tumultuous stars danced in the darkness to the cacophony of chirping and whining insects. The tears had stopped, but what kind of thoughts would be running through that small head of his?

They stepped onto the swampy estuary, the tide coming in, covering previously dry sandbars. Fish scattered around him, heeding warning from the quickly greying and cracking apart algae underfoot. "Ready to go?"

Simon nodded his head, his gaze still upon the ground. He wished that he wouldn't mope like that, who knows what his mother'll think when she sees both of them. "Give me your hand, to make sure I don't lose you."

At that moment, the planet disappeared around them. They were back to the white cliffs below. Asha's grass crackled under his feet, reminding him that he wasn't welcome. "I'll let you get home now, okay?" Simon took a few steps towards the garden, then turned back to him. "Waiting for something, little one?"

He shook his head, running and jumped, grabbing a hold of Charles' leg. Both of them fell onto the grass "Hey! What are you trying to do?" Simon popped his head above the knee, his small hands gripping as hard as burrs, nuzzling into it. There were tear stains being left in the dark fabric. "He-ey," He tried to sit up, only to fail since the kid had climbed up to his torso, hanging for dear life around his neck.

He fell back, accepting his fate, the brittle dead plant matter not exactly making a nice bed, but it could be put up with. There was a strange weight upon his chest, warmth emanating to his entire body. Charles blinked, feeling his own eyes becoming wet. This had never happened,

had it? It was always from afar, whether between Simon and Asha, or Asha and Lucas. Simon relaxed, still keeping his arms like a chokehold on the poor man. His sobbing had died down slightly to more heavy, labored, breathing.

“I can-” Charles croaked, “I can understand if you don’t want to talk right now, but if you ever want to go back, you can ask me... That way Lucas doesn’t go trap you or something, okay?”

The grass around them bent in the wind, the matriarch’s palace visible above them, probably judging them as he spoke. “And- we’re probably making your mother more worried as we speak. I can carry you there, if you want.”

Slowly, the little one shuffled off his chest, letting him get up, holding his arms up high, hands stretching in and out, jumping up and down eager to be picked up. “Right,” Charles laughed, taking up the small person, “Let’s get you home, shall we?”

He followed his previous brown footprints, crushing the already far gone and dead organisms. Simon took home in the crook of his neck, breathing slowed alot to the point where it could be guessed that the kid was asleep. The warmth and weight felt nice. The feeling of someone being with him. His legs quavered with each step, where was this all his life? What would Asha do if he never returned with her star? Could she even retrieve him? Maybe it would be better for all of them in the long run if Simon came to live with him... Charles shook the thoughts from his head, entering the glade to see Asha sitting on the porch steps. She got up, walking towards them. A purple glow overtook both of them. “I’m going to put you down alright?”

“Nooo,” the kid whined.

“Yeesssss,” Charles said. “I can’t just hand you over to your mom... think how sad she’ll be when you don’t want to stop clinging to me?”

“Mmeh,” the grip loosened, and the child was finally put down, still gripping at the pant legs. You could still run off with him, keep him for yourself. It was too late, the little one stumbled to his mother, who quickly scooped him up, smothering the poor thing.

“Thanks, Charles,” Asha said, smiling, but her eyes had lost the light they typically carried. “I’ll go get the jars for you.”

He waited as the duo went inside. The palace above them. All that was needed was for Lucas to come dancing down on the wind, gracing them with their presence. She would be screaming her head off for him to leave, crawling back to the pit of his mountain. Asha watching in the background, clapping her hands over her ears, not saying or hearing a word. But for now, for what felt like worse, he was alone, Simon’s warmth slowly disappearing from his chest.

He looked up to see the little one staring from behind the doorway, his head peeking from the side, the jawbreaker eyes as wide as ever. How adorable... Asha stepped into the frame, handing off the jars to Simon, who trotted down the porch steps and across the green. He hefted up two red brown earthen jars, tied together with purple cord. “Thanks...” he said, bowing his head. “Don’t make Ash worry, okay?”

The little one nodded, perking up and looking attentive. What a change... would he always be like this? Or would he chill out over time? “See you two!” He waved, starting to make his way back to the chalky cliffs.

“Bye, Chuck!”

“Ch-Chuck?” He turned to see Simon waving, bouncing on the balls of his feet. He waved back, “See you soon, and don’t hesitate to call!” There was a visible smirk on Asha’s

face, probably enjoying his flustered look. Stars, why did goodbyes always have to be so awkward?

Chapter 7

“Mom, couldn’t this wait? Maybe wait until his second planet?” Asha spoke, wringing her hands together as they stood on thick slabs of ice. Sprays of water were ejected into the thin exosphere. Like a second sun, a gas giant stood watch, its faint halo tidally locked in, causing a continual barrage upon her moon’s ancient sliding surface. Tiger stripes were pressed upon the icy chasms, orange bacteria devouring leftover chemical energy. “Don’t you remember how it messed me up in the head?”

“You’re coddling him. He needs to respect me” Lucas looked to the horizon, viewing the hundreds of other satellites falling across the giant planet’s sky. Her stony skin was filled with thousands of pockmarks, carrying different colored blemishes just like the ice below, whether it was blue, red, or yellow.

“Well, yes, but-”

“-But? He called that star-destroying bastard instead.”

Asha bit her lip, whisking her gaze elsewhere. Countless organics making their way into the atmosphere began to freeze in the temperatures, no longer heated by tidal forces. It wasn’t exactly Simon’s fault that he was rescued...

“He needs to learn his place.”

He wasn’t even told about what her mother could do... An asteroid came into view, growing a fiery tail as it free-fell, disappearing amongst the distant thick swirling yellow and red clouds of the host planet. Who knows what damage it could do to a smaller planet... or even to the motivation of her child.

“Couldn’t we postpone it? Just a little bit?”

“No.”

She flinched.

“Then could I ask for a small favor beforehand?”

Lucas turned to her daughter, her hair had turned a mixture of green and purple gas, forgoing its typical gray and white. Her eyes narrowed, pulling even more attention to the swirling stars and galaxies within. Blinking red, yellow and orange dots, even some extremely bright blue ones. A frown was hard set against the craters of the distant past.

She gulped, “Could you at least give him some time to enjoy his creation beforehand? And maybe let me talk to him, to prepare him?”

Her mother blinked, her surface features relaxing slightly, “Very well. But not even you can stop this. Understood?”

“Yes- yes mom.”

Simon was waiting for them. He ran up to his mother, giving a quick hug, leading the duo inside. There was a tangible layer of politeness between the generations. Asha sat down on the couch as her mother took the armchair, crossing her legs, resembling the same image that was portrayed whenever on her throne in that satellite palace. It scared her so much when she was little, the telltale signs of a soon-to-be coming lecture.

“Simon?” she called her star from the kitchen. “Can you wrap up-” she caught her mother’s eye “-stop whatever you’re doing and come here?”

He came over, looking at them both. “What is it?”

Asha wrung her tongue over her lips, picking her words carefully. “My mother, Lucas, wanted to take us both to your planet to check things out. She also wanted to make a demonstration and show how she works.”

“How she-,” Simon started. “Is it... is it extremely important?”

“Extremely so,” Asha said. “I want you to get everything you think you’ll need and be here as soon as possible, okay?”

“O-okay,” he said, “I’ll be right back.”

She watched him run up the stairs, presumably to collect his notes and tools. She winced under her mother’s glare. “Were you expecting something else,” she said softly, turning her gaze to the floorboards.

“No. It's very you.”

She knew that the words didn’t mean anything, but it was a matter of factly saying. It sounded like claws scratching against pure bone and chalk, digging for some sort of nutrients to find none, only causing what should be nonexistent pain in the process. Asha blew a breath out, trying to press all of the tumultuous thoughts out, to dissolve into thin air, but they stuck, like the jam to ripple fuzz.

—

Simon stretched beneath the trees. Large cones of seeds sat dejectedly on the needle-covered floor. There was a pleasant sharp smell that arose from the crunching of the dead foliage. Bugs, bacteria, and fungi lingered beneath it, slowly devouring the mulch. Running through the forest, there were vast plains, revealing a stalking party of great giants. They had

powerful hindlegs, pounding against the dusty ground, ready to outrun anything that came at them. Their heads were elongated but short enough to maintain a powerful jaw. A long tail swung behind them as they ran after a small furry animal.

The predators bounded forward, snapping at their prey, intricate muscles rippling under their rough colorful skin. Tiny forearms swung uselessly from side to side, claws tipping each finger. Luckily they didn't pay attention to him, and Simon went on his way.

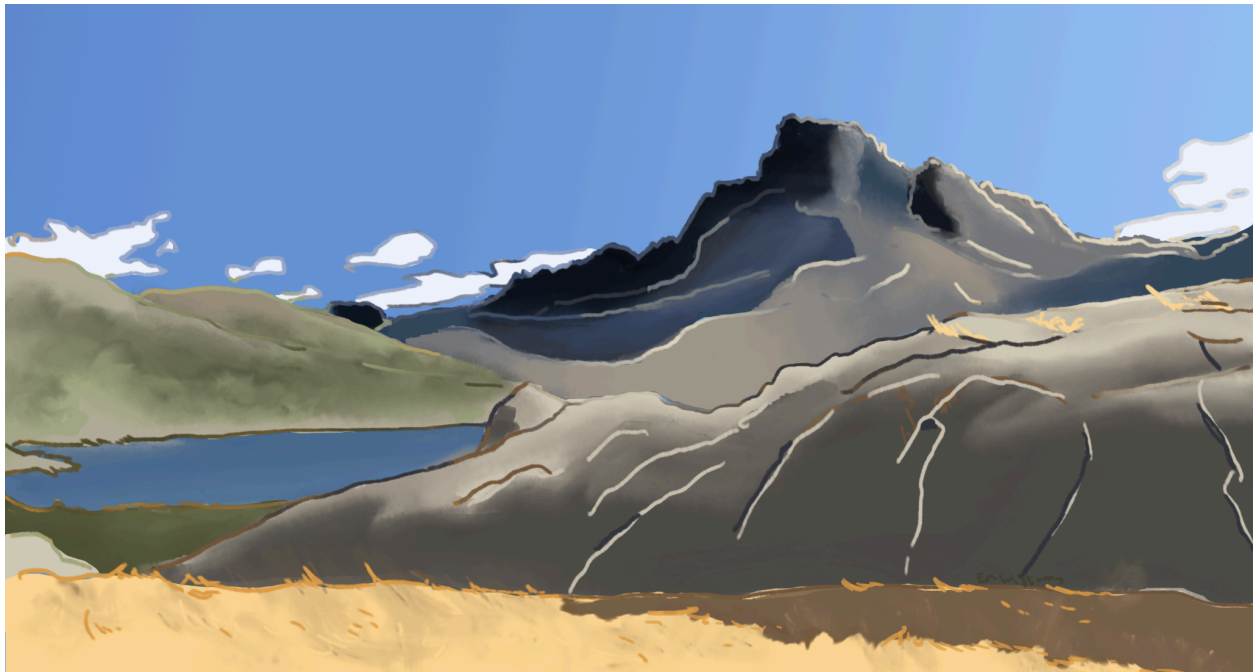
Away from the forest-plains border sat a small nesting sight, diligent-looking fathers and mothers swapped sitting on large eggs. Purring could be heard passing between them, as well as the smell of the excess manure due to the stationary lifestyle. He popped his head to see clutches of precious eggs, each one carrying the possibility of a new child to carry on the legacy of their parents, to stomp and roar their way into a terrifying and amazing planet.

A 'krik' was heard.

He swiveled his head to see an expectant parent tilting their head to observe the noise. An old shell being broken out of. Carefully, he climbed closer, sitting by to watch what he always missed away in the garden. Scratches were heard as the child righted itself inside. The crack widened on the egg, a shadowed figure ready, working against the thin embryo containing it.

An elongated beak broke through with a surprised squawk. Purring came from the parent, nudging away some of the shell, nuzzling against the newborn. Did his mom do that to him when he first arrived? It must have since this resembles such a pinnacle of kindness and parental care. He watched the parent and child interact, the continual breaking of the egg to finally reveal the complete miniature version of the pounding giants. The duo cooed, both of them settling down to rest with the other unhatched siblings.

Simon laid on the ground, contenting himself to listen to the symphony of different sounds, whether it would be the crickets whirring in the tall grass, the breeze blowing through the pine trees, or the parental purring. Everything was a work of art, a mastery of craftsmanship, and he reveled in his abilities. Where else would he go after this? What would he create in this busy and life-filled world? The deserts were conquered, the oceans, the forests, the mountain tops. There was no niche that couldn't be filled!



“Simon!” Speaking of parents, there came his. Her green curls flowed behind her in the wind, a similar color to pine needles and newly sprouted ferns. Her brown face matched the silt that sat just below the streams’ surfaces, filled with nutrients and life, ready to be used for future generations of plants and animals. Her brows were knit together in thought, a small frown upon her round face. Red dwarf eyes dulled slightly telling of a possible problem.

“Do you like it?” He asked, sitting up, and waving at her.

“Course I do, but-”

“Then what’s your favorite thing?” he asked, looking up at her. “What do you think of these giants? I made them for the express purpose of outrunning any problem that might come their way! And- and they are omnivorous and very adaptable!” Everything was so great here! All of his hard work had paid off in these hardy creatures. Surely she would be proud of him, right?

“They are- they are very nice, bud, but-”

“Are you proud of me?”

She stopped, turning towards him. Was there something wrong? Did he do something that she didn’t like? “I will love everything you create. Including these great ones! I wish that I could create creatures like this on my own projects!”

Simon blinked. He got up, dusting himself off, asking, “Is something wrong?”

“What? No! No, buddy, I just wanted to ask you some stuff before Lucas gets more stuff moving, okay?”

He tilted his head, feeling uncomfortable-ness settling in. “Okay...”

“Alright! You will never give up creating right? Even if something terrible happens?”

He hesitated, twisting his gaze away from his mother’s, looking over to the newly born babe, the shell falling in away from it, hanging fragmented to the thin inner white skin. Circling back to her red eyes, solar flares arcing around her irises. “Simon?” She pressed him again, gripping his shoulders tight, almost dragging him closer.

“Is something going to happen?”

“Nothing that you haven’t already dealt with. That comes with our line of work right?” She gave a crooked grin, the corners of her eyes crinkling with smile lines. The tenseness in her voice didn’t change at all. “So promise that you won’t give up? For me?”

She needed him to say yes, she wanted to know that she could count on him to continue. Why would she ever question it? He loved what they did. "Of course," he laughed, trying to keep away the uneasiness.

Asha relaxed, beaming down at him, "Thank goodness, I'll come back to get you when Lucas needs us, okay?"

He nodded, "Okay, but-"

"Just stay around here, I'll be back soon."

"Yes, but-"

She was already walking off into the tall grasses. A furry animal shoved off a stone to reveal a dark burrow beneath, squeaking out a series of calls to their other denmates. The fur on its small lithe body arched in possible defense against the pounding giants. Simon kneeled down, presenting his hand to the prey, which sniffed skeptically and after a good search around him, nuzzled into his hand. It was a pleasant feeling, soft just like the ripples he modeled the fuzz after. Downy and fluffy, warmth coming off of it, the small heartbeat pattering against its tiny ribcage. Just as it appeared, it quickly disappeared within its dusty home again.

He blinked, turning his gaze back up the sky, it was slowly turning to its night side, the atmosphere turning back to its prehistoric orange and red, then to a transparent lavender and black. The beautiful stars shown above, merrily blinking away, far away distances but their light still managed to travel here through burning knows where. Lucas was up there somewhere. The mother and daughter would do nothing to harm his creatures, right? Of course, he created multitudes of them to be able to survive anything that would be thrown at them, they could run away from anything. Herbivores, omnivores and carnivores traveling from place to place when the seasons came, cycling through to more pleasant areas.

His mother would do nothing to harm any animal, big or small. There was no meat on her table. The eggs carried no fertilized yolks, the plants and milk brought in were over abundance, going to waste otherwise. No, there was nothing to worry about! Surely anything that Lucas had to show would be as beautiful as the planets she manufactured.

Crickets started their crescendoing whine in the warm spring air, playing a long wary song to their unknown creator. He had to stay put until the duo came to find him. The giants bounded back to their nests, their long tails sweeping up dust and bacteria. Cool breezes flew in from the distant mountains, tipped with slushy snowmelt. Why couldn't his mother wait with him for Lucas? Like the parents to their newly born babies, still sitting in unbroken shells? Maybe she had other stuff on her mind, wanting to go explore and admire the rest of his work. At least, that's what he hoped it would be.

A wind blew in, looking upwards sure enough sat his mother and stood Lucas above him. The matriarch's white and gray hair turned dark against the blackened sky. The giants squawked in outrage as the intruders descended, abandoning and dispersing from their nests, laying their eggs open for possible thieves to steal. He ascended to join them, stepping upon the air like the stairs back in the garden, climbing to the point where his mother patted the area next to her for him to sit.

Quietly, he joined them, just as he sat down, they zoomed upwards, far above the ground where the clouds below became smaller just as the planet returned to a sizable marble in space. Then finally the trio returned to gray ancient rock. Simon looked around for a moment in disbelief. It was the moon, the faraway satellite, but why did they come here? Just on some sort of field trip. It was his planet when he first came... except with the thick atmosphere or active volcanoes. He took a step forward, microscopic dust rising at his feet, sterile as could be.

“Why are we here?” He turned to Lucas standing by. She matched the lunar background, white craters and all.

Asha said nothing, turning her head away.

“To watch,” the stone woman said.

“To watch what?” he said, their voices sounding wiry and thin up in this strange atmosphere. The sound was still traveling through space, so there was some sort of strangled air up here. He turned back to his planet, “What can we watch from up here of all places? Doesn’t your work take place elsewhere?”

“No,” he heard her say. A shadow fell over them, but this side was still facing the marble, it should be completely bright. Looking upwards he saw a massive pockmarked rock flying overhead. Falling away from them, towards his planet’s surface...

“No...” he said softly.

“Asha grab him”.

“No!” he yelled, trying to run away from the grabbing arms, being held back from flying away. “Stop it!”

“Stop stOP STOP *STOP STOP STOP!*” He screamed into the starry void. The asteroid grew red in the distance, free falling from orbit into the atmosphere, crashing through cloud after cloud and hitting the rock beneath. All of them would be dying under sea water, nobody can outrun a tsunami. Volcanoes would be erupting releasing plums of ash, blocking out the sky. His voice became hoarse and hoarser, working against his captor's strength. The little ones barely had time to live, their mothers and fathers would be dead lying on the ground, being turned into decaying carcasses. Wide expectant bright eyes turned to dull and dead. He broke free, running towards that woman, screaming. It all stopped.

—

He fell over, silence held over all of them. Lucas drew her hand away, hiding the now lava oozing hand back inside her long sleeve. Asha covered her mouth, trying her best to keep standing. "How annoying."

She looked at her mother, and then back to her star's planet, massive waves and dust clouds already able to be seen crossing the continents. "Pick him up, we're leaving."

Not moving, her mother yelled, "Asha!"

"Y-yes," she stuttered, gingerly picking up her child. Not a single quiver came from him, stunned into the same position he was when he was running towards her mother. His eyes had dilated the purple pupil to a miniscule dot, tears welling up at the sides. Who knows what is going on in his head right now. She held him close, but no warmth was there, his body resembling the frigid cold of the moon, like he was dead.

"I'm sorry," she whispered as the dusty cragged surface disappeared beneath them to reveal her sanctuary and garden. From the sound of the whooshing wind, she already knew that her mother abandoned them. She probably didn't want to deal with them now that she got what she wanted. She showed her power and that was enough. All she wanted to do was to deal damage. All she wanted was the destruction of animals that were living on all her planets! Asha slowly stepped inside, feeding her feelings of bitterness. It was too soon... It was always too soon. There were amazing things there! Something that she could have never dreamed of before. Those giant trees filled with needles and pine smell, dropping cones where seeds collected and dispersed into the underlying mulch! For star's sake! There was so much potential.

She looked down at her star. Tears rolled down his face, and still, no sound came from what probably would have been a sobbing voice. She was like that when it first happened to her, right? With every step up the stairs, her legs quivered, carrying the sentiment for both of them. Anger, bitterness, and knowing of arrogance. He shouldn't have had to deal with this. She opened the door to his room, white light spilling in from the windows, her mother's temple sitting framed inside them.

What a blasted sign of insolence if she ever saw one. Watching above and judging. Couldn't they have waited? She laid down her child to his hammock, it swung under his weight. What could she say? How would she explain? Would he be upset and mad more than he already is? What will he think of her? Those differentiated circles stared upwards, the tears drying into salty trails. The surrealness of the moment took her, dragging her towards tiredness and back. She said nothing and left.

—

She lied.

She lied to him.

There was nothing that he had already went through. He had prepared for it, he had prepared for as far as he could. So instead it was a massive asteroid pounding into the ocean and earth, unleashing wave after wave. Countless fish dead, all of the giants dead, plants populations decimated. The only way to escape such a thing was to send creatures out to other planets, to not hold all of the eggs in one nest.

The bright eyes of the newborn baby looking out at their parents. The affection shared between them, having no idea what would come next... What if that happened to him and his mom? Would he be terrified in his last moments? Simon tossed in his hammock, holding a pillow closely to his chest. His bow had come loose around his neck, becoming a nuisance.

He threw the white ribbon against the wall. What a pain. What unimaginable pain! What pain could be felt as millions upon millions of his little ones dying in that impact. He would have to start all the way back to the smallest creature, building his way up to somewhere new...

His mother lied to him, he blinked at the tears. Why didn't she prepare him? Why didn't she tell him? Why didn't she try to help him? He snuggled against the rough course fabric of his blankets, an extraordinary coldness moving upon him. Curling up tighter and tighter, he became a small bundle in a big house with a hostile frigid world waiting to take the next bite from his work. Burn it all to coal.

Part 3: Purple Stars Don't Exist

Chapter 8

“ Flowers burst forth on the 4th day. Covering the brown dirt floor of the plains. They spread forth, bringing color and sustenance to organisms that needed it severely. Soon, the blooms would turn to fruit and seed, generating more food before a winter’s cold.”

- A religious text - Origin and Author Unknown

“Simon?” Asha creaked the door open to see a pile of blankets and pillows thrown upon the floor. A homemade cocoon similar to his moths. Within the cavern beneath, she saw two rainbow eyes peering out from beneath. A shudder came from the bottom, causing a pillow to bounce to the floor. “Buddy?”

The wind whistled through pipe plants outside, air flowing through the long hollow tubes filled with nectar and dew for nonexistent pollinators. He made no movement. She stepped inside, seeing sketchbooks and notebooks tossed aside, pages torn from the spines, ripped apart like leaves being eaten away by insects.

“Are you going to come out soon?” Nothing again, “It would make me happy to see your face again.” She took out a sigh, kneeling down onto the single place on the floor not covered with papers. “I want you to understand that it was for the best. That your populations were getting out of control and needed to be kept in check. And of course, my mother- Lucas- thought it would be best if she stepped in.”

“li-ar,” a muffled voice came.

“Hm?” she asked, pressing her hands on the floor, scooting a little bit closer to the blanket mountain.

“LIAR!” He shouted, throwing her off balance, making her tumble to the floor with a thump, torn up sketches and diagrams flying into the air like dead needles and thin grade foliage. His blankets fell around him as he stood up, a dark silhouette against the light from the windows, towering over her. “You're such a liar! A liar and a coward! You said to help populations we would create disease! That we would creat challenges! That we would create diversity through those problems! And- and- Now Lucas steps in! For burning knows what when we had it handled! You could have told her that! Told her to stay away!””

“I-I-,” Asha tried to start, feeling her tongue loll in her mouth, unable to start any words. She tried to sit up, but fell back again.

“Why should I ever! Ever get my hopes up again! And Again! Bounce back again and again to have them squished under foot!” He screamed, thumping his hands onto his chest and thighs, as if an animal trying to dispel adrenaline. “How the stars can you burning do that to yourself to me!”

Then why don't you just leave!” She screamed, not realizing what she said for an instant.

“Fine!” he yelled back, running towards the door.

“Simon!”

But he had already slammed the door shut. There was the thumping down the stairs, to the front door slamming. Then silence, not even the wind would break the tension. Asha sat up, eyes wide, her mouth slightly agape, tasting the air that had a tinge of burned carbon. Ashy and smokey... She looked at the torn apart drawings, sweet dreams of nothings. Some carried red Xs, and then one stood particularly out to her, its edges were browned and stained by light and food.

It was a picture of one of the giants, crudely drawn like how long ago he had started to make life beside her. How eager he was.

The mother looked more around her, silence weighing in on an empty and lonely house. Quivering took her body, tears welling up. The gardener sobbed upon her runaway star's floor.

—

Simon scrambled down the chalk stairs, coming to the dark tunnel, frigid cold air blowing from the inside. His breath was berating him, screaming at him to stop, but he ran inside, wanting to go until his mother could no longer follow him. He hoped she got ill if she tried, to become brittle and blow away in a minuscule red and orange dust cloud. Light from the entrance faded, but despite this, he continued. He could hear the roaring crashing waves from the ocean outside slowly grow quieter.

He slowed his step as the tunnel started to ascend. He was in complete darkness apart from the slight purple glow that he gave off. The sides were smooth and freezing to the touch. The sound of dripping water could be heard further ahead, giving some hope that there would be a more open space sooner rather than later.

Sure enough, the smooth tunnel floor gave way to harsh stone stairs, darker than the chalk ones by the gravel beach. His feet smacked against the slippery granite. He rubbed at his eyes, sore from the awake night and the tears. His legs began to ache when he made it to an open cavern, water collected from the stalactites, dripping into large ponds. Needing a break, he kneeled beside the stagnant lakes, cupping his hands, the liquid completely clear and free of life. He lowered his head to take a drink.

“Little one?”

He spit out the water, rushing around to see two white-blue eyes above him. “Charles!” he shouted, trying to end it with a laugh. Why not shove away that nervousness and excitement, didn’t it help last time when he saw Lucas and Asha together?

The eyes tilted in the darkness, coming closer to reveal the black mask pointing down at him with its massive beaked appearance in his purple glow. “Aren’t you supposed to be home?”

“Home?” Simon chuckled, “What home? I don’t want to go *home*, wherever that might be.”

Charles shifted, kneeling down to his level. “Did something happen?”

It was so dry here, but also so humid. Darkness was surrounding from everywhere, the only light coming from himself. She said that he should leave right? Maybe that he should never return? Nothing was worth it. He brought his gaze up to Charles, trying to look him in the eye, then drew his gaze away.

“Simon?”

He shook his head ‘no’. He was a liar. He had fallen to where Asha had laid her morals down to die. Bitterness welled up great chasms, asking him to be sarcastic, sardonic, and terrible. He kept quiet.

“Do you want to go home?” the man asked.

He shook his head ‘no,’ again.

Charles blinked, then turned to look at the rest of the cave. Light came from the other side with a ‘neerrr’ sound. Simon turned to that direction, anxiety starting to build from mystery. Maybe a monster that kills immortals, to put himself out of his misery. End it right here and now. Let’s go dive into its mouth.

“Do you want to go home with me, then? It's not too far ahead.” Simon got up, stumbling for a moment. “Want me to carry you?” Thick-gloved hands presented themselves, offering help.

He inched away, shaking his head.

Charles blinked, before turning away. “Alright then, follow me.”

They moved through the cavern. It was similar to the ones that he had on his planet, full of geological formations and water carrying different silicates and mica down the walls and ceilings. However, there was no life made for this area, no bioluminescence, or blind white fish. The duo came closer to the white light to reveal two lindwurm-like creatures that carried bulbous heads with large black eyes and showed jagged teeth behind nonexistent lips. Two arms pointed from their glowing bodies, tipped with three thick claws. They made no move to attack, only to float and stare.

“What are they?” he asked, peering at them from behind Charles’ leg.

“Oh, so you can speak!” Simon blushed. “They’re Echoes,” his guide said, putting out a black-gloved hand to the creatures, and then was nudged into by their bulbous heads, emitting a purring-like sound. “Think of them as similar to your ripples, if not more chatty and mischievous, perhaps.”

“Echoes,” he repeated, lifting his small hand out for the wyrms to see. They looked at it with possible interest, then nuzzled into his palm, giving into continued purring.

They continued into a steeper tunnel. The march onwards began to pull at his legs and feet, begging for somewhere soft to stand, to fall down and rest amongst damp mulch and fuzzy moss. Charles said nothing, his body swung from side to side as if ready to keel over, like an animal drunk on natural alcohol. He watched in partial interest, the only fascinating thing in this world of dark gray drabness.

After a while, his guide stopped, "Give me a second, my light should be around here somewhere." He said nothing, feeling Charles leave his side in a cold absence. A shock of fear tore at him, telling him that he was alone again despite that obviously not being so. His guardian was just retrieving something, and he wouldn't lie like his mother, would he?

A small blue spark came from the center of the room, and light in waves came up the walls. Simon had found the both of them in a smaller cavern, with niches on all sides, filled with various bottles and instruments of different uses. Off to the side is a small couch made out of dead straw and fuzzy plants, all brown and dried from time. In the center was a calcified stump of wood. Each of the rings stood out, perfectly polished with time and care, showing the great age and wealth within them.

"Worried that I may eat you?" Charles chuckled, taking off his hat and putting it away into one of the holes. Simon registered his host again and shook his head. "Please come in. Come in. Although I must admit, it's not as warm as your mother's house."

"It's alright..." he murmured, coming further into the sanctuary. It felt alien to him like he wasn't allowed. That he should run back to the garden, to the well-known and beloved. "Is this your home?"

The headscarf was pulled away in a single stroke, quickly unlodging the beaked mask from the man's face. "Something like that. Although I believe you and your mother's worlds to be much more comforting, despite me not being able to take much part in them."

"Mm..." he murmured, tiptoeing to look into one of the niches. One had a crystalline jar filled with a plant of some kind submerged in red liquid. Above in the ceiling were shards of amber carrying perfectly preserved insects and small animals. There were even some of his own work...

“Where’s your bow?”

“Huh?” Simon asked, turning to see a man with bone-white skin, and thin blue veins pulsing from beneath. Hair, as red as blood, crowned his head.

“Your white bow? It's usually on you at all times, no?”

He patted his chest and looked down to see that his ribbon was no longer in its place. His neck suddenly felt cold, as if a windchill was blowing against it. “I- I took it off.”

“Oh?”

“I thought it didn’t fit my appearance.” Liar.

“I thought it was cute, but if that's what you think...?” Charles blinked his blacked-out eyes. The blue sparks in the center were still present. “Honestly, I'm still a bit surprised that you haven’t changed your form.”

“My form?” asked Simon. Was this like the teleportation question? Is something wrong with his make-believe atomic makeup or something? How did this even work in the first place?

“Change it, you know,” his host shrugged, taking out a bustle of straw and a starting circle that he had started previously. “Into what your mom and I look like maybe?”

Heat flushed up his face, “No-o? Maybe? No?”

“Fair enough, little one. Take your time as always, and all that. Maybe you’re doing it subconsciously, 'cause you’re darker than last time I saw you anyway.”

“Darker?” Simon echoed, coming over to the petrified stump.

“Maybe more opaque would be the word for it?”

He held his hands against the table, trying to see if any details could be seen through them. Sure enough, faint rings could be seen, colored a darker purple than yesterday... Why such a drastic change?

“Did this happen to you and Asha?”

“What happened?”

“You guys becoming more opaque over time? Or maybe being silhouettes like me?”

Charles lifted his eyes away from his work. Something clicked in his head, causing blue to flush his cheeks. “Do you want a seat? Maybe on my bed? I’m sorry for not offering sooner, but its not very often that I have company.”

Simon blinked, looking over to the strange lump of a bed, “Uh, sure. But did it?”

“Were me and your mom like you?” He nodded.

“I can’t remember,” his host chuckled. “All I remember is that one day your mother changed her hair from red to green. I changed mine from blue to red, and that was that. Funny how we kinda switched...”

He tried for a single moment to imagine Asha with curly red hair, probably matching her eyes. Then Charles with blue. The picture didn’t quite fit, like trying to rebuild a broken statue but the pieces just didn’t connect. He sat down, feeling the bed shudder underneath him, the plant matter squishing beneath, but still pokey in places. Would he have purple hair then? If he ever figured out how they did it? What if he couldn’t do it? “How’d you do it?”

Another shrug. “Your mother will probably remember if you want to go ask her.”

A pang of awkward pain hit him. Don’t want to go back to ask her. I want to learn from you! The person I never get to see, a really cool person. A person who isn’t Asha. A person I didn’t just have a fight with. A person who didn’t just tell me to leave. “What are you doing?”

“Making a basket, although I should probably go back to work.”

“What is your work?”

Charles looked up from the small plate of straw in his hands. “What do you think it is?”

Simon bounced up and down on the uncomfortable bed, pain stabbing through his palms. “You kill plants and animals wherever you step. There are no living things in your house... To kill things?”

His host knitted his brows together, his thin mouth tightening into a frown.

“Am I wrong?” he asked.

“Well, no. Its just- Why don’t I show you?”

“You don’t kill things?!” Simon exclaimed.

Blue rushed into Charles’ cheeks. “No, it’s not that. Did your mom ever tell you that you are a bit rude?”

“She told me I asked too many questions,” he prompted.

“She makes a fantastic point like always.” No, Simon argued to himself, she doesn’t make good points like always. “Let me get my stuff, then we can go.”

Simon watched his guide bustle around the room, picking up a staff with a blade at the top. Replacing the mask and headscarf onto his head. “Why do you wear that stuff? If you don’t even need it?”

“Starlight doesn’t entirely agree with me.”

“Why?”

“Because I’m afraid the universe remembers what I did.”

“Remember what?” Simon tilted his head, shuffling off of the harsh bed.

“That I killed the first star,” he said. There was a nonchalance about saying it. Perhaps it was due to how much time had passed since the event? Or maybe because he had gotten so much beratement about it. But the stars were so big, and there were so many of them...

“How?”

Charles turned, pulling his squished wrinkled hat onto his head, "By touching it. And then there was a great shockwave, sending out compounds that you and your mother use to this day."

"Like what?"

"Oxygen? Hydrogen is of course a given. Iron might have come later, I can't entirely remember. Helium, lithium, silicon," he said, pulling his cloak upon his thin frame, latching it with a red ribbon and fire opal pendant. "Stuff like that. Shall we go?"

He nodded, following the man to the opposite side of cave. A thin sheet of cloth partitioned to somewhere far deeper.

"Aren't we going to the gar-ocean?"

"No. That's when I want to take the scenic route, or when I want a break."

"Oh," Simon said, watching Charles open the curtain to reveal a greater cavern. The ceiling couldn't be seen above them, stars knows how big this cave was. White lights could be seen dancing in the distance.

"I want you to not get lost okay? I just had a massive influx of little ones."

"A massive influx?" Simon asked, needing to walk a bit faster to keep up with his guide's longer stride. The sound of their steps echoed in the chamber.

"Mm, did an extinction event just occur for your project? Or one of your mothers?"

He hesitated, did he want to unload everything here? Everything that had happened? But Charles was only trying to help at points right? He was good! He was not a liar and just wants more information. Information is important, it informs decisions. But if he hears the fight with Asha, he'd probably just send me home, right? "Asha's."

“Oh? Really? I thought they were way more colorful than your mother’s style. More expressive for sure.”

He said nothing, wringing his hands together, feeling a chill set in again.

“But if you say so– But to set the record straight,” they came to the lip of a massive crater, and downwards was a spiral of ghostly white figures, all circling round and round. “I’m the custodian of you and your mother’s projects. Of course, the majority of them dissolve into nothingness... but the echoes-” At the otherside was a small group of the bulbous headed lindwyrms. “They were the last ones of their species/branches/kingdoms and thus stayed with me. It’s almost like a museum of memories to look through.”

Simon looked back into the deep circling lines. Near the top some amphibians waddled past. Frogs were hopping downstream, silently croaking out funeral rites. What was there in the center then? Ultimate demise? What if he tried to go down there? What would happen then?

“Of course,” his host continued, “I have to make sure that everyone is playing nicely. It would be nice to have some help, but-”

“Then can I help?”

Charles stopped, looking towards him, trying to register words that he had heard. “You’re your mom’s helper. Speaking of which, isn’t she worried about you? I should get you home before she tries anything weird. Come’n let’s go.”

“No!” Simon exclaimed.

The man turned back to him, “No? You have been refusing to tell me anything. And as far as I can see you’re a liar and trying to avoid something! So if you want to stay, tell me.” The blue sparks in the goggles glowed harshly against the soft white light.

Simon stood, trying to come up with some sort of excuse, some sort of reason for his actions. Anything but the burning truth! Please! Let him run away for some time longer. When he tried to speak, his words became a garbled mess. His hands felt sweaty and began to shake, moving to the rest of his body.

“Simon.”

Heat and coldness began to press down upon him. “I–.” He didn’t want to say it! He didn’t want to get pity! He didn’t want help! He didn’t want anything and he wanted to run away as far as burning possible! Away from the garden, away from the mountain! Away from the pitiable desolate palace above them! “I got into a fight–” he took a breath, “with my mom because- because she said that I could handle whatever Lucas was going to throw at me and I wasn’t. So she lied.”

“So these little ones” He swept his hand to the ghostly lines of departing animals,” are yours, yes?”

Simon nodded. He had lost. He had tried to get away with this and lost. Why couldn’t he have been in the right? Just to get away scot-free and safe and sound. To never look back. His eyes hurt and his sides ached.

“I know I am asking a lot of questions, but please stick with me, okay?”

“O-okay.”

“I am going to take you back to your mom, and we will sort this out.”

“No!” Simon shouted. “Anything but that!” Charles started to talk, but was quickly cut off. “Please let me stay here! I want to mourn for the loss of my project. I can do anything! I can help you and make your life better! I’ve learned all sorts of skills from my mom that I can do for you!”

His host blinked down at him, objecting, “But your mother-”

“- She told me to leave if I didn’t like what happened! Please, you gotta believe me!”

Simon had managed to work himself into a sobbing frenzy. He sneezed, shaking tears from his eyes. “Please, please, please... Please let me stay.”

—

He was a complete and utter pushover. He had said yes to the little one. How could anyone say no to a sobbing child. Although, Charles knew very well that Lucas had left him and Asha to cry, but that didn’t mean the precedent should stand. It was almost like he had gotten his wish to steal Simon, to hide him far into the mountain. Even if it’s for a temporary time.

He had given him free roam through the caverns, and that he could return home at any point he desired. But there was no move towards it. Only to sit by the sides of the descending craters, watching the dead pass by, or drawing or working in his room. It was a quite small hovel. Maybe it should be expanded in case of future visits.

Despite the guilt, he had to admit that it was good to have company. Simon was a bright soul, often trying to laugh the most and ask questions, to fill empty spaces in the caverns with vibrant colors and chatter. The echoes enjoyed his presence. Maybe it's because some of them realized that he was a bastion of creation, and thus respect him as thus they were his children. However, inside moments where the little one didn’t think he was watching, his face would falter, staring out into the distance thinking. Asha probably couldn’t tell what her child's thoughts were either.

He had gone out to see his friend to tell her what had happened to Simon, to ease her possible worries. When he entered the glade, he had found a mass of overgrown plant matter, nearly cocoon like. It was similar to when they were little, when Asha had just started to create. He had found her covered in layers and layers of algae mats, lying tearstained face down, unable to move from tiredness. But today, it's a mass of vines encircling and encrusting her in a living tomb.

Picking what resembled the thinnest part of the balled up plant matter, he placed down his hand, it shuddered, the new green cracking to a dark brown, then to a light white/yellow. The thick woody stems shrunk and shriveled beneath his touch to reveal their source inside. She laid in a huddled curled mess.

“Ash?”

“Go away.”

“You’re as stubborn as your kid, you know that?”

“Simon!” She shot up, the vines thickening in a second. “You know where he is?!”

Leaning towards him in an instant, almost to the point where they touched.

“Be careful!” He reminded her. She drove back a little bit. Her face had red splotches all over, dark circles sat underneath her eyes.

“Where is he?”

“He’s at my home-”

“- in the mountain!” She sputtered, holding her head in her hands.

“Asha, please, calm down. He’s fine.”

“Is he going to come back?”

Charles stopped, in all truth, he believed that Simon would return to his mother. It would only be right... but what would happen if he didn't come back? For his project to just slowly decay into neverending obscurity? For all of his creations' evolutions to stop in that singular moment? He shook his head. "He just needs some time. Collecting new inspiration for future projects."

She relaxed a little bit from that. "He'll be back? When?"

"Soon, not too soon, but soon," he ushered her. "Do you want me to help get you out?"

She nodded, rubbing her eyes. "Can you get me the shears you got me? I can probably cut through."

"You sure?"

"Yeah".

He nodded, leaving her within her trap. He came back inside to see the shears laying down beside his portrait. How long ago was it that he sat for it? Too long, no? He picked them up, was Simon's present around here somewhere then? He turned to the kitchen, sure enough, to see it sitting in pristine condition, still in its original canvas packaging. Asha must have forgotten to give it to the little one. Maybe he could take it with him to give it to the kid himself.

As he stepped down from the porch, seeing his friend sitting listlessly within her cocoon. She would probably say that he might as well keep it here since Simon would be coming back soon, and if he said anything otherwise, she'd ball up and cry, or just argue maybe. Asha perked up when she heard the crunching of the grass, shoving a thick arm through a vine-barred hole. Her hand was stretched wide open, revealing the tiny scars spider webbing all over her skin, probably from the tools of her craft. He dropped the shears into her outstretched hand.

“I’ll head back, good luck with breaking out,” he got up. “I’ll tell Simon that you’re alright.”

“No!” she shouted, pushing the thin blades against the vines. He turned to her, as she closed her eyes trying to gather her thoughts. She restarted, “I mean, please, stay for a while. I can get you some jam.”

“Ash-”

“Please, Chuck. Just let me talk to someone for a bit.”

He blinked. It was evident that she was wrecked. Emotionally, and physically, but she was probably the most mentally damaged. She laid heavily against her own made prison, waiting to be broken out. Slowly sawing out by tools of his own design. Where was that proud woman he once knew? The person who would send him off without much, caring more for her health than himself, where was she?

He nodded, sitting on the wooden steps, pulling his feet up to join him to stop more death as he watched his friend slowly cut away at her dead vines. There was a point in time when she would never hurt a creature. Nerves or otherwise. Now she was quickly chopping away. He could feel the awkwardness as she would be staring at him, expectant of something he didn’t even know. There would be the shuffling for him to leave, they would cough together at the door, saying goodbye over and over again, until finally, he had managed to leave.

—

Simon sat at the petrified wood table, drawing in a notebook that Charles had brought back from Asha. He was thinking back to the circling down animals, slowly coursing their way

to the center. The ability for them to wait for their loved ones, then to leave together. Down and down, and on and on, forever until nothingness was desired, and then they'd jump. Was it lonely to wait for them, then for their family members to stop wanting to wait for the others? When did that chain stop? Because someone's gotta know someone else in the end. Then wouldn't be the whole entire species or collective till they all do collective suicide? Or he supposed, after death-cide.

He looked up from his work to look around the room. Charles had managed to make a side area after hauling load after load of broken gravel to the outer cave. They had dragged the bed, which was made a little bit more comfortable due to his own diligent work, into it. The single lantern in the center burned brightly, making devious shadows crash against the walls. They waved at him, beckoning to play in the niches of carefully placed objects and materials.

He turned back to the sketches, resembling the inter-turning circles of the dead, as inner leaves descending towards the center, of varying colors giving way into a way to store sugar during times of excess. There was an inner desire for that fleeting sort of beauty, to grow and wayne with the interchanging seasons of his planet. However, where would he even start to put them? Perhaps a plant, but fern, grass, mushroom, or tree? Shuffling that side of the papers away, the few doodles he did of his current companion came up.

There was more of a focus on shape heavy language. The sharp beak protruding from the mask's face against the rounded goggles. It was darkness upon darkness, unlike the color Simon typically chose for his own creations. Black with pinpoints of red. Poor Charles, so lonely here in these caverns, to not experience the great magics of laying down in soft grass or fresh food. Only to eat the fermented and dried stuff he kept stashed away. Animal or plant, take your pick.

There were points in this strange dark place where he felt tired of thinking about Asha, about Lucas, or even Charles. Burning stars, there were even times where he was tired of talking to them. All conversations treaded the same ground: “How are you” “Good” “Whatcha doin today” “Work like usual” “Oh... cool! Beautiful weather isn’t it?” “It is~” and thus it continued. But when he was tired of talking to the two people he normally talked to, and walked away and felt lonely, what would be the solution? Nothing. Just go back to the house, cavern, and continue where you started. There wasn’t a new amount of people coming from somewhere. There was no one to praise the work of others, or to laugh with, or just have new discoveries.

So what if there were more. More of Charles, Lucas and Asha. More of him. More like them. What would they look like? Maybe they would have the same four limbs, two legs, two arms, moving them around and carrying stuff. They would have their own children, bustling each other around, delivering hugs, kisses and headpats. Overall, there was just a desire for more personalities to talk to. More friends maybe... for him to have people like what Charles and Asha have.

He laid his head against the cold table. He was probably lonely. Nobody in his family would be willing to give that level of compliments or affection. He always seemed to be the one giving them out freely, enjoying the smiles from Asha or the curt, awkward nod from his host. It didn’t feel fair, like he was trying to hold up everything against nothing. He could try to create a creature that could communicate with him, to hold a relationship, and to quite possibly love him and adore his creations. Simon blinked, watching the shadow of the lantern’s bars stand straight like a prison. It would be really nice to leave this plane of existence one day into happy waiting arms.

“How do you think a person could get Lucas to not destroy their creations?” Simon asked Charles when the man came in from his most recent expedition.

“And by person, you mean you?” His long gloved fingers unearthed items from within his straw-pack, carefully moving it, playing Jenga, with itty bitty trinkets in a niche. “Why do you ask?”

“Because shouldn’t someone teach her a lesson? Show that she isn’t always in control?” His host turned around, tilting his head in thought. Simon continued, “It’s not fair that she can just wipe out an entire planet whenever she feels like it!”

“You’re still upset by that?”

“Yes!” he barked, banging his fists against the beautiful polished stone, his chair behind him falling behind him. Then he backed away from the emotion, calming down, “Yes, I thought I was being smart in my last attempt, but that failed too.”

“What did you want your creatures to do? Hide? Bury their heads in the sand?”

“To run away.”

Charles flopped into the chair opposite of him, letting one arm lull over the side. “Well. What do you think you can do after creating great powerful monsters of work? Ready to tear down anything in their way?”

He leaned onto his hand, looking at the pile of papers before him, scanning it for something. “I- What if they could adapt to the catastrophe?”

“But isn’t that something you have to manually do?” His companion argued. “And that it also takes a serious amount of time?”

“But what if they could do it in their own time? I am not talking about pavlovian response, or mental elasticity, but rather to come up with long term plans! Like my mom and I!”

“I don’t think your creations have that long of a lifespan, little one.”

Simon broke off for a moment. Charles was right. There was no ability for a single creature to plan massive things by themselves, quickly dying afterwards. No. There would have to be a different component! He snapped, “What if they passed on their projects to future generations? Like how some of my animals already do with food source information, or to avoid thunderstorms!”

“How would that help?”

“Well, let’s see! There could be a snowballing effect with information. Pieces building upon others, slowly creating an acceleration of ideas till a breakthrough of adaptableness works! Like my mom and I building upon past information to help fill old niches with new creatures! Just repeat and adapt!”

Charles nodded slowly, “Alright, but how are you going to get there?”

Simon stopped in confusion. “What? What do you mean?”

His host nodded, asking again, “How do you plan to get creatures to adapt to an asteroid hit when you make them take a serious amount of time. And how do you manage to get them to stop it? As far as I know, nothing in your repertoire is able to achieve that.”

He was silent. Good points were made, check and mate. Nothing was able to stop an asteroid strike, hell he didn’t even know if his mom, or even Charles could do anything about it. But, the animals could figure that out for themselves! There would be a point where they would realize the oncoming threat and thus prepare for it! But how would they even know it was there...? Not any of his creations actually know about outer space apart from the pretty twinkling lights above. So how?

“They could use tools like us!”

“Oh?” Charles seemed to look more interested.

“Yeah! That way they could go do anything! Make baskets, make sculptures, forge ahead and create something entirely new! Something that we wouldn’t even think of! Imagine it! People like us who are able to create and change the world and environment around them. Be able to give hugs to their children and protect them when the going gets tough! And be able to talk to us and tell us stuff and-”

“Woah there, little one,” his host chuffed.

“Why woah!” Simon interrupted, pushing his palms hard against the table, standing high upon his toes. “This could be something great! Something amazing! A solution to all problems!”

“And you want to create a way to jack power off of Lucas into your own favor because you’re upset. How do you expect this to get past your mother, not to mention the old queen herself. You don’t typically go run off telling no one anything about your plans, do you?”

Simon fell forward across the table, spreading his arms wide in a stretch. “No... no I don’t. But-”

“-But what?” Charles heavily leaned his head against the palm of his hand. “How do you even plan to get tools into your creatures first? Isn’t it a rule that you can’t just outright give stuff to your projects? That you have to implicitly advise them in some sort of way through environmental characteristics?.”

“Well, yes-”

“There you go,” his host laughed, “Although if it does go through, I hope to meet these creatures. Because if they’re yours, they’re sure to be fun!”

Simon tried to smile, but felt it falter on his face. Good points and ideas to take into consideration. He'd just have to find a way to work around Lucas and Asha's conventions, to be able to fill this new niche would be a great stride for him, and hopefully the rest of his family.

Chapter 9

“ I want you to close your eyes and breathe. Become aware of the autonomous functions beneath your skin, whether it would be your blood pumping, your lungs lifting and retracting air, the electric pulse of your heart, and the swirling acid of your stomach. You may think for a moment that this is a stupid exercise, but I want to ask you to put a little bit of thought into the layers and layers of rhythms and pushing, and pulling parts that allow you to live. Some of these have been working before humans, a few of them even going all the way back to the most common ancestor for all chordates, possibly even further than that. Now envision if someone had to integrate all of those changes, over millions and billions of years. How painful do you think that would be?”

- A Philosophical Question by Dr. Nutter

Simon waved at Charles as the man disappeared from the air in which he floated. Waves crashed against the shore as a cold breeze pulled through, probably heading toward the heart of the mountain. He looked up to the stone stairs above the gravel beach. Footprints had been carved into them over time. Hefting the straw pack on his back, he climbed upwards to see his mom and to start on his new organisms and plans.

He felt the grass spring under his feet, welcoming him home. The oblong branches and spikes that came from the center of alien trees stared in the distance as if he was a stranger walking to a nonexistent home. His own creations sat nearer to the foreground, great green ferns

and pine trees contrasting hard against the mixed purple and pink foliage and needles. Moss covered a portion of the barks, feeding into and clinging to the more nutrient-rich plants, savoring each moment of symbiosis between parasite and host.

He made his way by wind-whistling plants, a new development by his mother, the liar herself. Their inner tubes were covered in a sticky carnivorous mucus, ready to catch any awaiting prey, which of course wouldn't be here until some Ripple got some smart ideas, just in general, terrible ideas. The waxy bulbous fruit was on the ground, already getting devoured by the passing fluff balls that waved at him. At least they recognized him unlike some of his mother's more hostile flora.

Finally, he made it to the glade, the house standing in the center. A prick of fear took seed in him, begging him to run back to the cavern. To stay where it's safe and where you won't get hurt. Where you know your ideas will be excited and accepted and not to deal with the person you love dearly. His legs took root at the edge, trying to join the neighboring plants. Simon quickly shook his head, trying his best to ignore the flight response that tried to pull every bit of his being to sprint away.

Maybe she would be happy to see him? He stepped up the creaking wooden steps, placing his hand on the supporting beam of the porch. Or maybe she'd be blindly upset. Screaming and yelling at him for leaving, asking him why he did it to her poor soul. Or perhaps worse, she'd be indifferent, waving her hand from the kitchen table but keeping her eyes glued upon a hunk of clay or sketchbook, asking him how his 'vacation' was. 'Was it good' 'Yes' 'Good, get back to work'. There would be a sense of what he hoped for. Asha was always the more emotional type of person, and he hoped he'd be welcomed with a great clapping voice.

He stood before the window screen door, curtains hanging from inside, open to let in light to the inside. Raising his hand to the knob, he hesitated again. She would be happy to see him, and if she was mad, it'd soon pass. He gulped, feeling hollowness begin in his stomach climbing to his cheeks, making him feel a little bit lightheaded. There'd be only one way to find out after all, so he opened the door, squeaking on its hinges.

“Mom?” he asked, his voice small against the great living room and kitchen. The old table and three chairs were empty. No one was by the fiber-burning stove, or laying taking a nap on the paisley couch or armchair. A thin layer of dust was on the bookshelves. Maybe no one was here? But would Asha really leave for so long after he left? Maybe she was distracting herself with the distress he gave her. But was it really that right to let himself be the center of her universe in his head?

Simon moved to the stairs, climbing up the unsteady floorboards, trying his best to ignore the frightening creakings giving way from his weight. Maybe she was asleep in her room, unlike her favorite place for naps in the living room. He came to her door, beautiful carvings inlaid into the wood, painted brightly with pinks, oranges, and purples. Slowly he turned the brassy knob to look into the bedroom.

The thick comfortable slab of a bed sat in the center, the side table covered in drink ring stains. Off to one side were a cluttered desk, a lamp ready to be switched on and off at one's notice, and piles and piles of chemistry and biology notes. Everything was normal apart from the missing lady of the house.

“Mom?” he called again, feeling a bit more hopeless. Maybe she left here forever, only for him to find the shell of a house upon his return. Never to see her smiling face again, never to hear her laugh. Perhaps it was revenge for the chaos he gave her when he stormed out. Maybe, in

some miracle, she was dead. The hollowness rose in his head again, numbness spreading under his eyes as tears began to spill over. She was gone, and she was never coming back for him.

Abandoned and alone in the bastion of his comfort, the spark had gone cold in its charcoal nest.

He heard the downstairs door squeak open.

“Mom!” Simon flew down the stairs and saw her standing before him. Her round face and eyes froze in a moment, her mouth slightly open, her red tongue lulling behind pearly white teeth.

She blinked, her movement finally melting together. The sides of her eyes began to crinkle as she pressed her lips into a smile then a grin. “Bud!” He ran towards her, stringing his arms around her legs, holding on for dear immortal life. His head nuzzled forward as violently as possible wanting to make sure that everything was there. That she was here and not upset. To even his surprise, she laughed, patting him on his head.

“Did you have fun?”

The mother and child sat down at the kitchen table, two hot teas poured into chipped ceramic mugs. He stared back at her as she studied him.

“You look different. Did Chuck do something to you?” She asked.

Simon shook his head, looking down at his mid-tone purple hands “No. He found me like this.”

“Hm, alright then,” she scratched her chin, leaning back in her chair, picking up the front legs to rest upon the back two, rocking back and forth. “Were you safe? Well cared for?”

“I was. Chuck was very generous to me, even giving me a basket to take my things back here!”

“That's good. Very good,” she clapped her hands together, closing her eyes in thought.
“Chuck always was the giver of gifts.”

“He said that you had forgotten to give me one, and told me to remind you,” he added, switching his legs to a crisscross, feeling a little more antsy.

She opened her eyes, two small burnished red stars sitting within oceans of white. She blinked, searching her memory.

A snap of fingers, “That's right! I did forget, didn't I?” Getting up, she opened a cupboard and brought out a large canvas package. A purple ribbon tied it up, a nice sheen came off of it from the soft afternoon light coming through the curtained windows. It was set upon the table with a muted thump.

“Can I?” he sat a bit taller, looking at the parcel with interest.

She nodded, “Go ahead.”

He made a grab for it, bringing it closer. The canvas was rough against his hands, the ribbon was soft, stiff and flexible. He pulled at the string, undoing the bow. Quickly the cloth unfolded to reveal a beautiful silver watering can with a purple paw print in the center made of amethyst.

He blinked, studying the light passing through the multifaceted jewels, and how it refracted into small rainbows. “It's... beautiful.” Picking it up, it was surprisingly weightless, easy enough to carry around on normal duties. And would probably be useful if need be. Did Charles make all of it?

“Mmm,” she said.

Simon looked up to see her slump back into her chair, her green curls spilling over her shoulders as they shuddered down. “Are you happy?”

“Huh?” she asked.

“Are you happy that I’m back?”

She shuffled in her chair, leveling her gaze down to him. Her dull red eyes searched him. What was she looking for? There was no smile on her face, and he suddenly felt like he just made a dire mistake in asking that question. He should’ve just been happy to be here, to be thankful for this space. Would she yell again? What was she going to do?

“I am. Just a bit tired since I just came in, bud.” He wanted to say something, but nothing came out. It was like all the air was taken out of his proximity. “Do you want something to drink? Tea?”

“S-sure,” he said, trying his best to smile, but it disappeared as soon as she turned. His soul had fallen to splatter on the ground. Coldness overtook him, pressing against his body, saying No, of course. Of course, she is tired. She was tired because you made her worried. Hell, she could be indifferent. And maybe next you’d get hit. He shooed away those thoughts, bringing the watering can close to his chest. It was made just for him, perfect and lovely. He was fine, and his mother loved him so that was that.

Simon flicked through the papers, shuffling them onto the table, taking account for the measurements, he wired off a chunk of clay to cut into. She’d love this. The complex forms only add another layer to the food chain. Another layer for reproduction. Stars, he’d even make a bunch of other species rely on it for sugar and nutrients! He felt evil, so why not?! The energy felt like it was shooting through his fingertips as he took smaller chunks off the original, rolling them out and flattening them against his palms, laying them aside for later.

Getting out a small piece of rolled up paper, he started to make tiers of the flattened clay, going round and round in a circle, almost like the dissension to the abyss. He held it out to his view. It would of course need to be colorful to stand out against the rest of the foliage, to attract pollinators. It could turn into other things, so why not make it only a part of the reproductive process? To blossom into bulging fruit, to be eaten by predators and prey alike to spread the seeds further along! It was similar to the pinecone, except less hardy and more nutritious to the hungry creature.

He spun the small petite thing between his fingers, delicate and graceful to a point. As always it would be a while of careful selection and gene manipulation, but he'd get there. Start with the small unassuming seeds standing by on the vine, then move to possible pollination, then the arms race can begin. More and more varieties branch out to be the most viable option for passing animals. Then he'd place them here in the garden for his mother to be amazed and smile at her protégé's skill. Wouldn't that be lovely?

With that, he moved his mind to think about the relics and leftovers of his giants, shriveled and shrunken after the desolation of that burning asteroid, no doubt the scars still existed upon his planet's surface. Places where nothing would grow or return until a while later... but then again, some grasses and microorganisms could be quite resistant. And where food resources went, predators followed.

The ones he created with feathers still existed, climbing into treetops and recklessly bouncing around, gliding from branch to branch. Of course, he also created the ones that had an active flight, but they were wiped out, probably due to a lack of nutrients after the sky turned black and red for a good period of time. Photosynthesis had been knocked out of kilter, volcanoes, and ice ages, the disappearance of resources equals death. Why did Lucas have to go

do that? Why? Why?! Ice ages had been dealt with, the blackout had been dealt with, but for right now, damage control was being picked up to continue where he had left off, even if it would take him stars knows how long!

The feathers were pretty, the snapping beaks were useful for eating the insects. Trees were good for hiding and protection, even for a source of food. So the remnants of the giants would stay there. The colorful feathers would stay for right because they were integral for mating rituals, showing off beautiful displays of half-assed dancing, swinging and playing around fringes of fluffy material, trying to attract the plainest female. Although, he had to admit it made him laugh when he first created the idea. Stars, it still made him smile and giggle. The drop in temperatures might make the fluffy down feathers more useful, so perhaps they should spread further across their body. Just add it to the growing list of things needed to keep an eye on and manipulate.

More and more thoughts exploded into his head. There was the knowledge that he should take one thing at a time, just slowly chug through everything until completion or until he was satisfied, but the work that lay before his goals were staggering. Not to mention that he wanted to create a creature that could escape Lucas completely, to prepare for inevitable disasters. Getting to new niches was always the hardest, took the most thought, patience, and trial and error.

So how? Asha was out doing her rounds on her projects, speeding away, and making sure things were going straightforward. He was stuck at home brainstorming and banging his head against the wall. He looked towards the portraits sitting alone on the bookshelf. Lucas looked like her pretentious self, and Charles was nervous and awkward as always. Poor Chuck, alone again in the caverns. He'd create something to give everyone company, to relate to, and to not just rely on each other.

Simon drummed his fingers against the aged table. The hunk of clay stared at him in the half-light of the soft afternoon. The curtains blew gently in the open windows. The rustling and whistling of needles, tubes, wiry stems and leaves could be heard. There was a point where inspiration should be taken. Notes should be sat upon and devoured. There would be off days and on days. So, today even if he had hit a stone wall, it would be broken through and pummeled to dust.

Where could he go to get more inspiration? He had plumbed, cleaned the caverns and came up with the incoming blossoms, the modification to relationships between organisms, and the descendants of his beloved giants. There ought to be somewhere he had never been before! A place that would show its bones and meat if he were to just try to look. He turned away from the hunk of material, grey and drab against the brown and reds of their home.

Looking back to the bookshelves, piles upon piles of formulas and genetic code sitting by with hox genes and key receptors. There were sketches of transitional forms, vestigial structures, and oncoming goals. Slowly his view winded back up to the pictures of his mother's mother. Her cloudy hair swept around her face, her skin stony and hostile, filled with ancient cracks and pockmarks. A faint halo was held circling her head. Eyes were vacant and elsewhere with their pitch black natures with the small glowing stars captured within.

He had never been to her house, palace, temple, place. She was terrifying and terrible, a choking smugness held around her, an infecting miasma that only affected his dear mother. She holds all of the universe in the palm of her hand, bringing on deathly pieces of astral pebbles to wipe out his and Asha's hard work! Burn her! But... but... he had been too scared to look into her for inspiration, so maybe...

He'd have to tell his mother, not to just leave in the middle of everything. To not storm out on her again. But how would he even try to set it up in the first place?

—

Asha had found her star to be staring out the window with a vacant look in his eyes. He didn't even notice when she opened her door. A hunk of modeling clay was sitting on the table, the surface dry and crusty. How long had he been sitting here? Was everything alright?

"Bud?"

He was shocked straight, turning towards her. His eyes widened from fear, but quickly returned to normal, crinkling in a bright kind of way. "You're back early."

She nodded, "Didn't want to go away for so long this time. Thought you might want to hangout, do something together."

"Oh?" he asked, a little bit more sparks seemed to shoot through him. "Like what?"

"Um," she said. She had kinda just said it as an excuse for why she came back. Because she was worried that he had disappeared again. But he was here, so all was fine. "What would you want to do?"

He blinked, his mid-tone purple silhouette absorbing the oncoming darkness of dusk. His eyes still gave a soft glow, his body less so. She looked towards his neck to see the bow still missing, she should have been used to it by now, but it was still saddening. Pushing the thought away, she heard him say, "Would you be willing to look over my designs and plans? I'd like to put stuff by you."

That was different. His tone was more laidback and subdued, less bubbly. It was probably best not to pay attention to it. "Sure."

She sat opposite of him, moving the chunk of clay to the side. A small delicate creation sat by his stack of papers. It had thin leaves of material strung around a twirled paper rod. Maybe it was a way for him to distract himself, or maybe a new plan? He handed over some sketches and ideas.

Flicking through the notes, a variety of plants and animals that connected together were used, the beginnings of an interlocking food chain incorporating a new variable. She looked back to the small clay creation off to the side and nodded, it'd be the final goal, or at least a point that would want to be reached. There would be more experiments for feathers, and flight was certainly attainable under the amount of atmosphere held by Simon's planet. There'd need to be an adjustment to the skeleton and weight, but he was probably well aware of that already.

She came to the last page and fell quiet. "You've left your doodles in here. And why hands of all things?"

His eyes flicked to avoid her gaze, "I want to create a creature with hands."

Asha blinked, "Why in everything that you could do, would you want that?"

"So that they can use tools," he said.

Her thoughts stopped like a centipede skewered through the head, the rest of the body accordioning up to find the morbid result. She opened her mouth, then closed it. Then opened it again. "Why?"

"So that they can do stuff? Adapt?" He looked down at his own clay marked hands, spreading his fingers wide against the old table.

“Bud, but they already got their own tools. The teeth that they use to chomp, the acid in the stomachs, claws and nails to scarp at the dirt and peirce anything they desire. So why hands?”

He shuffled, kneading his hands together into a pyramid, his gaze focusing somewhere else, “To build and create like us.”

“Why do you want a creature to build and create like us?” She asked, feeling like she was getting closer to the original reason.

“So that they can adapt at a quicker pace. To prepare for anything.”

“Prepare for what?”

He closed his eyes, and he spoke, “To prepare for Lucas.”

That was a stone to the face if she ever felt one. “Simon, bud. I know you don’t like her, but at least put up with her for my sake. Please. And that means not creating a creature just to spite her.”

“But-” He started. She could see the number of reasons or backup excuses piling up in his head. “But it isn’t just that! There are things that we can’t help that quickly! We work in the long term, our creatures can work on themselves in the short term. But imagine the possibilities if they could work in our place! Protecting themselves and continuing forward with that! Its not just about Lucas but ourselves! There is only so much that we can do in continuing them and we can give them even more tools to live even further beyond!” He stopped for a breath, banging his hands against the table, making it rock for a moment. “Just imagine it!”

She stared at him and blinked. What could she say? To just drop the idea that he created because all of his hard work went down to an asteroid? That it was because they couldn’t act fast enough? That they worked in generations rather than seconds or minutes? Would it be fair, would

it be right for her to just shut him down? Was this for her mother or her own reasons? “They don’t need tools to adapt to seconds. They can run away. They can fight! That is why they have adrenaline.”

“No!” He shouted, standing upon his chair, wobbling for a moment, but it didn’t seem to faze him at all. “It’s not enough. They need to store food, produce it themselves. They need safety nets and be able to care for the neighbors around them!”

“Simon, you’re overreacting-”

“No! No, I’m not! We can only think about so much, we can only give them so much. So why can’t we do this for them?”

“Yes but-” This was starting to unrail to stars knows where.

“-and imagine how we could interact with them! They could be the solution to all of our problems-”

“-*You will stop!*” Her chair fell onto the floor with a hollow thump. His vibrant purple pupils shrank back, his body following suit, retreating into his seat. Was he going to leave again? Stars, was she like her mother? “Bu-bud. Sorry for yelling like that, I hope you can understand that I just feel frustrated right now, okay?”

He nodded, looking down at the floor. Her mouth felt dry, and her eyes wet. Slowly, trying to not make any sudden movements, she put her chair upright and sat down. She took a breath in and let it out. “I think your idea is good. But you need to be more realistic. How are you going to get them to use tools with their hands? Programing that into their survival instinct will take such a long time that your work might just be wiped out again. I want you to think, extremely extremely well, to understand the amount of thought that will need to go into that. You can’t even use us as blueprints because we don’t even understand ourselves.”

Her star said nothing, just keeping his head bowed.

Asha sighed. “You can do it. But I don’t want your spite against my mother to be the reason. And for me, try to get along. Alright?”

He nodded again. She looked at his small form, shuffled her chair back and went over to him. “I’m sorry, Simon,” she looped her arms around his neck. He was shocked for a moment but quickly relaxed under her touch. Softly, she kissed his head and rocked him back and forth. “Love you very much, and that means I want the best for you, okay?”

“Okay,” he said quietly.

That single word hurt. She nuzzled into his head for a moment longer, but it felt empty, cheap like she was trying to make up for the damage already done.

“Alright!” She clapped her hands together, “Let’s stop moping around and start the party!” She laughed, trying to lighten the mood only to see her kid staring at her, his eyes wide and unsure of what to do. For a moment, Asha faltered.

“What are you doing just sitting there bud!” She nearly shouted, putting on her biggest grin in the world. She shoved her hands under his arms and tickled, making Simon screech, laughing, and jumping off his chair. After seeing her objective reached, she scooped him up. Holding up as close as she possibly could, spinning around and around, welcoming the incoming inertia. “Come’n! We haven’t even celebrated your return yet! Don’t you want to have fun?”

She looked down to see his two wide eyes staring up at her, “Mom?”

“Yeah, bud?”

“You’re a terrible liar.”

She put her lips together and smiled, feeling her face cry out in tiredness wanting the charade to end. “I know. But I’m trying, so lets have some fun~”

“Okay...”

Asha stood by the window, looking at the rustling dark purple and blue shadows casted across the grass from her mother’s white light temple. She had just sent Simon to bed. He had finally laughed at her antics and played into her idea of simulated normalcy. Dinner was eaten and discussion was pulled over future endeavors, what he experienced in Chuck’s company. Far off into her rickety hostile environment that had been softened by her star’s creations, she saw two electric blue sparks peer out. Why did he always have to be so creepy at times?

She walked out to the porch, waving to her friend. “Didn’t expect to see you tonight.”

“I wanted to see how you two were settling in. And thank you,” Charles said, waving back.

“Thank you for what?”

“The stepping stones,” he stopped to gesture the black-grey slabs of slate pressed down onto the soft grass.

“Oh, it was Simon’s idea,” she smiled, wringing her hands together, trying to get rid of nervous energy. “I’d have probably never thought of it myself. I’d probably be too scared.”

He shrugged, finally taking that step onto the porch, “Don’t entirely know what to say to that. But you are both lovely in your own ways.”

Asha laughed. “That’s a good thing to say. Sadly I just sent him to bed so I don’t think you’ll be seeing Simon tonight.”

Charles nodded, “That’s alright. I mainly wanted to check in with you. The last time you were in a pretty sorry state.”

She blushed, saying gruffly, “Yeah, well, when you get kids tell me how it goes for you when they run away on you.”

“I’d love kids,” he plopped himself down onto the harsh wooden boards. Making himself at home already. “I dunno how good I’d be with them, though. I’d think I would like to be like you. Happy and fun, not boring at all, and just a good time altogether.”

Her face began to feel numb and cold. Static took over her cheeks. The shadows shifted in an oncoming breeze, pulling in frigid air from above the ocean.

“But my line of work would probably be boring to anyone. Imagine just looking after the dead. It’s pretty stagnant at times. So I think you’d just be a better person to be around,” he looked up at her. “Ash? Ash, you alright?”

She nodded, rubbing at her eyes, trying to dry up tears. Her voice wavered as she spoke, “Yeah, yeah, it’s just-”

“Did I say something? Do you want me to go?”

“No, no. You’re alright. It’s just-” She cracked, needing to swallow for a moment.

“It’s just,” he echoed.

She sat down, shuddering, “I bet you’d be a great parent. You would probably treat them well, not yell at them, squash their dreams into tiny itty bitty pieces, or fight in trying to keep control. You would be calm and willing to support them through anything. And I- I-.”

“Did you two fight again?”

“It’s not like a *fight*. Fight. But more like,” she took in a breath and broke into a series of coughs. “It’s more like I yelled and he retreated. Just shriveling up into his chair, afraid like- like a small prey animal about to get chomped into pieces by a predator! There was no fight, only

freezing, not even any flight about him. Which I have to sadly admit I am happy about, but still! Do you know how that makes me feel?"

"Like your mom?"

She felt herself cringe inwardly. But nonetheless, the man was right. Asha nodded.

"I wish I could give you a big hug. But I think you worrying about being like her shows that you aren't going to turn out like her. And trust me, no one can be that much a burning black hole than Lucas is already."

She laughed, rubbing at her eyes. "I really really love her. I love her more than anything in the universe-"

"-even more than Simon?"

She was quiet at that moment. "I'm not entirely sure about that, but I wish that they got along better. Uh, hey? Did you talk to him about giving hands to his organisms?"

Charles blinked in surprise. "No? Why do you ask?"

"Because we were talking about it today and it's just stupid to me," she gave a nervous chuckle. "Its weird 'cause we already do so much for our projects. We give them what they need to survive in the wild, ingrained in their genes, to fight and run as soon as the sperm hits the egg. And, he's not satisfied with that."

"But that's how you've always worked. How he's always worked," he said.

"Exactly!" she snapped her fingers with a satisfying click. "So he said, 'it's because we don't work fast enough, that we don't prepare for them immediately. That there are situations that our creatures can't fight or run away from'. So, I told him to stop it. And that's where the conversation stopped. I don't know anymore," Asha rubbed at her face, clearing away the streaks left by the tears. "I just don't think its a very good idea."

“I think it's a good idea,” he said, turning away to look at her garden.

“What!” She sputtered. “Not you, too. Can't you just stand with me on this one?”

“Stand with you, or with Lucas?” Charles asked, his eyes blazing a bit more brightly behind his goggles. “Admit the fact that you would probably be fine with it, possibly even encourage it if you weren't scared about what your mother will say about sudden change. For something to be out of her control?”

She opened her mouth, then closed it. The ripples were highlighted by their pink coats, bouncing in the distance, probably fighting over one of those waxy staining orbs that Charles and Simon were so fond of. She honestly didn't really care about them. Asha gulped, feeling saliva build up in her mouth. What if she was just looking for her mother, to try and garner damage control. It would be the best in the long run wouldn't it? “He wants them to use tools like us. To build and fight. That's gotta take a lot more mental power than he currently has going for even his smartest organism.”

“Are you upset that he has more ability to go against your mother than you?”

“What? What! That isn't the point of this at all!” She sprinted onto the grass to get into his view. There was anger building up and boiling over into him. “The point is that its not going to happen. How in the burning stars is he going to get from normal creatures, basic prey predator stuff, self preservation, normal genetic mutation times, selections occur like normal. Does he even know how much time and effort that will take? Or how much experimentation?!” At this point it was a full blown rant, leaving her heaving for breath.

Charles shifted. That mask made it impossible for her to see the emotion underneath. What was he thinking? Was he thinking that she was a bad mother? That she was a bad person

for wanting to put her star's ideas to rest. "I think he does know it. And is willing to go through the work for it."

She bit her lip. "He wants to do it out of anger. He is creating these guys because he wants to mess with Lucas. How are you fine with this?"

"Why aren't you?"

Asha stared at him. She spread her arms, then let them flop to her side. What point could she even make? Simon had a right to be upset. He had a right to be upset with her and her mother. So if this was his way of getting over it, then he could do it. She shouldn't care. She could be better than her mother and just let it happen rather than fighting against something that her kid so direly wanted! She could be the better person.

She twisted to look at that dumb square in the sky, then back to her friend's kind blue eyes, his body backlit by the warm light of her home, Simon's home. "You're right."

Charles blinked, he sat a little bit straighter. "What?" He asked.

"You're right. I should be fine with it," she felt heat rush to her face. She knew exactly what he was getting at.

"Can you say that again. I think I am not hearing you correctly," She could imagine the smile forming on his face.

"Go burn, Chuck," she huffed. "Why don't you go home before my mother swoops down and takes you away?"

"Didn't know you were going to be so sensitive about it."

She rubbed at her face, trying to get the frustration to burn out from any amount of movement. "Yeah, well, it's a sensitive day. Just leave. Please."

“Uh,” her friend shuffled to standing up, his eyes dimming slightly. She stared at him with no feeling apart from any other thing than burning frustration! He was probably hurt, but what good would that do her at this moment? “See you later, then.”

Charles walked along his stone path, dissolving into the blackness that swallowed her garden completely.

—

“I’m going to try to reconnect with Lucas,” Simon said as Asha poured water onto her morning tea.

The kettle violently moved and the stream of boiling water went onto her hand. “Ow!” she shouted. “Wait, what?”

“I’m going to go see Lucas. Is it alright if I got away for a few days?”

She blinked. “Why would you do that?”

“To learn from her. To like her more maybe?”

Asha narrowed her eyes. Was she onto him, already? “Really?”

“Yes,” he said matter of factly, doing his best to keep eye contact and keep his ground. “Really.” You liar.

Her shoulders slumped slightly. “Ah”. A relaxed smile moved upon her lips, but there was a little bit too much teeth, her face crinkling a little bit too hard. “If it will be all well. Let me come with you, I have been to see her for a while myself”.

“I’d rather you not,” he said, trying to keep his voice as steady as possible. Brace for the pain, don’t mind it, you are doing this for the ultimate good. Also, she shouldn’t be apart of ‘spiting’ Lucas.

“Oh...” she faltered, “Can I ask why?”

Simon froze. Then immediately a solution showed itself. “I want to see how she is by herself and how she will interact with me. I want to learn as much as I possibly can. I hope that is understandable.”

Asha nodded slowly. “If you’re sure, then?”

Chapter 10

“ Kronos always seemed to be the tired, angry, abusive dad. Like, one of my kids is going to kill me one day, let me freak out and eat all my kids then. That's not like it's going to hurt my wife anyway, only me. Me, me, me. It is always me. Of course that isn't going to bring me closer to death! I am just saying, an angry abusive person would do that, and the point of his character is, of course, to be terrible. However, he wrote his own death warrant”.

- A discussion about the genesis of greek mythology by Edwardo Knight

Simon stepped into the air, feeling the concentration of gas press together under his feet.

“You'll be alright, right?” he heard his mother ask. He turned in the morning light, the sky still turning to its crystalline blue, no fluffy clouds in sight. Her green curls softly blew in the sea's breeze. Their work stood behind her, a cacophony of a mother and son's work with mixtures of green foliage and pink spines. Ripples stood by the border waiting for one of their caretakers to take off into flight. What were they thinking at this moment? In their lizard type brains?

“Yeah,” he nodded, shifting his basket on his back. There was an audible clink of jars and sculpting tools.

“You have everything right? Not forgetting anything?” Asha quivered like a single strand of grass against an ancient prairie. “You know that you can come back if you ever get scared or if you change your mind?”

“Mm,” he crinkled his eyes, knitting his brows together. “Will do if I get scared and want to run home with my tail ‘tween my legs.”

“Maybe we should call her first, to give her a heads up.”

“But she’s gonna say no,” he argued, flicking his gaze to the square palace above them, then to his worried mother. “So best to just go with it.”

She nodded with a sigh, tapping her foot against the soft grass of the chalky cliffs. “Be safe, bud.”

“Course,” he laughed, taking another step then faltering. Quickly he dropped and ran to hold her in a tight hug, putting all of his strength into a python-like grip. Her warmth radiated back at him. Nervousness shook off of her. Asha rubbed his back with a shivering chuckle.

“Love you.”

“You too,” he said, walking slowly back then galloping into a run and taking off to the white temple.

The air got colder and colder as he climbed. Further up, what used to be a hapless blank square became more detailed. First were the columns that stood starkly still, made out of grainy sedimentary rock, shocking how they hadn’t disintegrated with time. Closer still, the small dark doorway that stood in the side, within was pitch black, not a single ounce of light could be seen. Lightly, Simon touched down onto his predator’s territory.

He stood by the side of the opening, leaning inside to see if there were any important landmarks, but it was a vast cavern, similar as within Charles' mountain. Slowly, he took a tentative step in, causing all of his senses to scream at the possible desecration of holy ground. What was he doing? What in the burning stars was he doing, coming here to possibly get frozen again, to get carted back to his dear worried mother? "Lucas?" he called, her name echoing against the empty chamber.

Nothing came back apart from his own faded voice.

Simon went further in, minding the harsh slippery ground, well polished from the water impossibly slipping down from the roof in nonexistent humidity. Stalactites and stalagmites curved to reach each other, nearly making the same columns as outside. Pools of liquid sat stagnant and unmoving as he climbed downwards. Then suddenly there was an ascending slope, causing his eye to lead upwards to see a vacant quartz throne. Its imperfections of gold flecks and silica were still visible in the non-light. She wasn't here.

Despite that fact, it didn't serve to make him feel less uneasy. Where was she? Was she going to be upset when he came back, to see an unwelcome intruder? He looked at the chair built into the ground, it was quite probably made by Lucas just sitting in it over time. The stone suiting body over forced erosion for millenia. Cautiously, he raised a hand, and gently swiped his hand over the smooth surface. There was no porous nature to it, nor anything as he would determine as biological. Simon shivered.

Should he wait here? He turned to look at the throne room, feeling smaller than he ever did in the garden or even Charles' domain. He could wait outside in the fresh air, because at least there he could run away if need be. No. No, all he needed to do was wait, and everything would go well. Nothing would go badly, he was just freaking out more than he should. He blinked in

this black place. A small sliver of realization came to him: That's what he was thinking when the asteroid hit! A small spark of fury started to flame, but he squashed it. It was alright to be angry but the long term rewards would be so much sweeter when he got the hang of things in the first place. And that meant seeing what Lucas had to offer so that he could strategize. Even if it meant waiting in this creepy, hostile, sterile environment.

The tapping of his foot echoed against the stone walls. The popping of his voice exercised, rushing back and forth between the entrance and the throne. There was a reason why life was created, because otherwise the good portion of the time on those hunks of rocks called planets would be extremely boring. At least for extremely long extended periods of geological time. Who wants to wait until the next volcanic eruption, or asteroid impact, he sure didn't.

Maybe the old stone pillar had hid something fun in this room. Even though it was sincerely not explicable by any of her other actions, maybe he was just getting the wrong idea! Maybe a secret trap door, or... he looked back to the stone chair.

He skipped to the backside and sure enough, even if it wasn't as fun as he wanted, was a small doorway, lacking any piece of intricate detailing or anything cool. Even through the small mouth in the wall, it was even darker than the room he was already in. His mind bounced to even bigger ideas, scarier or otherwise. However, anything would beat the boredom that already sat heavy within his head. Taking a look back to the sullen throne room, with its slowly dripping water and emotionless architecture, he stepped in.

Blackness flooded his vision. The previous doorway could not even be seen anymore. The air around his head felt funny, as if there was more of a lack of it. Immediate panic set in, it was like being stuck within a box. There was no up or down, only forward and backward. But

then a small light glided above the floor, calling his attention away from furiously racing thoughts.

The small light was tugging at a trail of golden thread, pushing at a nonexistent edge, speeding away from Simon. Looking back to where it came from, he followed the gilded trail. Step after step he could feel no matter existing at points, or at least where atoms were extremely spread out. After a point a bright dot, carrying no tail, spun by, cartwheeling away into the darkness, then a few more, then a lot more, until there were so many that made a brilliant disc, spiraling out in beautiful arms with an invisible center. Hesitantly he stuck his hand out to touch it for only the stars to pass through his fingers, giving a warm tickling sensation.

There were a few more of the discs, all circling together in a cluster. More and more could be seen further away. Some of them looked like bright balls, the dots going willy nilly around a gravitational center, not as beautiful as its flatter cousins but still rather marvelous. He looked up as the place where he stood grew more and more lively with the slowly moving objects, dancing across space for his own amusement. Some passed dangerously close, even exchanging a few lights, some others spinning out and breaking apart. It was almost like if cells were not in a gravity bound space, just trying to move but not able to, so just bouncing around until collecting food.

He laughed. A small twinkling sound against the silence of these dancers, more beautiful than anything he could possibly create with his own two hands. How could Lucas keep this all to herself? Something so amazing and wonderful?

A sudden burst of light blinded him. Simon let out a cry, crashing to the floor, covering his eyes. "**You,**" a voice like a slab of ice sliding over another grinded within the air. "**Out.**"

Where did she come from. He struggled to right his footing slipping in the nonspace. Sure enough, he felt a harsh jab at his leg, immediately a sense of heat and pressure pressed against him, the instant change in environment enough to make him scream. However nothing came out of his mouth when he tried to shout. The black floor was replaced with a red planet with white poles. She knew that he couldn't teleport back even if he tried! How would Charles come to find him? Or even his mother!

Someone help! But no one was coming. So all he could do in that moment of sheer panic was to look up at her jagged face, lava cracking the skin to reveal dripping fire. Atmosphere! How far up were they! Was it thick enough?! Not knowing enough, he tried: "Hey!"

"Hey, hey hey HEY! DO you KNOW what you're doing!? Dropping me off on one of your most beautiful projects?! I mean can you believe it! Everything and anything more beautiful than one of my mother's creatures. WONderful geological features and amazing chemistry going into the boiling pits and icy poles! Like Oh my stars can you believe it!"

A confused look crossed the matriarch's face. He wasn't dropped yet, something was working! "Yeah! YEAH! And guess what! I ditched my mom's work because I wanted to see how you did it! Because honestly, the plain canvas is always more splendid than after you add paint to it! You were the person who created what I work with! Surely there is something that you can teach me!"

"Teach you?" She asked, the tiniest smile in the universe becoming more apparent on her thick as stone lips. "Teach you?!" A great booming laugh reverberated from inside her to shake him to his very core. His hope had plummeted to the planet and broke into millions of pieces upon impact.

“Teach the kid that disobeyed me?! Teach the moron who decided to throw a tantrum at a simple action? At me breaking your toys?!” He went limp within her grip. To a point she was quite correct. Stars, he was still mad about it, but he wasn’t about to tell her that!

“Yes!” he said flailing his hands feeling the gravity of the planet tug at him. “Yes, you would! You want to know why?! Because you couldn’t even capture my mother’s hearts with your creations, and now you have her kid! Isn’t that something amazing or great? You know, when I went into that chamber today I was amazed and blown away by the sheer amount of stars and planets and celestial bodies that you have in your repertoire! Its so much greater than what I could ever do in my entire existence, nigh anything that my mother could do as well!”

She wasn’t going to buy it, was she? The complete and utter mess and mixtures that he poured from his voice.

The wonderful view of the red planet was replaced with the hard stone floor of the temple once more. He was thrown upon it, releasing a gasp from his throat. Simon quickly held a hand against his chest trying to regulate his reaction.

“Leave. Don’t come back.” He quickly jerked up to see her grey and white fluffy cloud hair already disappearing the stone throne.

“Wait!”

She turned, the stars flashed within the blackness of her eyes. Ice floes crashing back into her voice. “*You* do not argue with an *order*.”

“But why not?” he asked, stumbling to standing up. Making his way to her throne, placing a hand on the side.

“Becuase I said so.”

Simon blinked. "That's terrible reasoning!" A crack splintered onto her hand. "I mean... I mean, how can I understand an order unless I am told why! Even Charles can do that!" The crack turned to a long running spiderweb. "And surely you're greater than him, no?" He coughed into a nervous laugh. "Soooooo, why do you need me to leave?"

At this, Lucas was quiet. "Because you're annoying. And I don't want to look after an annoying child that can't even look after himself."

His logic fell flat upon its face. "But I can be quiet! I can follow orders!" He tried to argue.

"And I have no need for arguing morons."

"I will stop arguing after you agree with me on this! Please let me watch you work!"

Lucas stared at him, her brows knit in frustration. Immediately they were back over the red planet, but in an instant of panic, Simon grabbed her legs and held on for what felt like ages. She said nothing, but swept her leg against now present stone, hitting his back against it. Simon shuddered, but held on, then was struck again and again and again and again.

"Do you want another asteroid to hit? Or are you just that determined?" she roared.

"No!" he screamed. "Just let me learn!"

"Like burning stars I would! Give up!"

"Never!"

"Insolent child! Stop this arguing immediately!"

"Never!" he screamed again, hugging hard against her leg, feeling the stone like body beneath.

“If I- If I let you sit in on one thing, will you go away?” She asked, weariness hitting hard at the ancient surface of her face. He proudly looked upon the damage of her face with the black marks and chasms.

He raised his head to look her straight in the eyes and said, “Yes!”

Lucas led him into a room off from the spinning discs, the blank stone walls still apparent, but it was more resembling what he saw in Charles’ home. Niches were in the wall, but the majority were empty. Instead in the center of the room was a hard blackened stand with a windup crank. Up near the roof were a variety of gasses held within see through flasks, the majority were colorless, but others featuring splendid greens, reds and oranges.

“Stay away from the anvil,” she said gruffly, grabbing one of the colorless flasks. He nodded wordlessly, stepping back. “Get back more.” He took another foot back; Simon looked up for her advice. She said nothing.

Without any words or background information, she poured the flask into the stand, a visible waterfall of gas escaping downwards. Just how much of it was in there. After a point, she began to crank, but his view was completely blocked. Silently, he crept closer, hoping that Lucas wouldn’t see him. He’d probably get shot off to the closest desolate planet never to be found again otherwise. Getting as close as possible to the point where he was just barely able to see it, a ball was starting to emerge from the center, coagulating and collecting the surrounding matter. A colorful disc coming into existence just like the ones outside in the black room.

An audible quality started to arrive in the air, with a greater and greater hum, the crank spinning faster and faster. So fast that light had started to spark from the center, the disc flattening more and more, compressing even further till a shockwave hit him against the wall. \

Wind felt like it was blowing out of him. He struggled to get up, but the ground even felt like it was spinning around and around and around just as Lucas continued to crank away at her pedestal, unfazed by anything happening. He finally managed to prop himself up on his hands and elbows, keeping his view steady on the immovable stone pillar that was the ultimate creator. She reached for more gaseous flasks, dousing them into the surrounding regions of the spinning disc.

After an unknowable amount of time, the room finally started to slow down. Stumbling slightly, Simon leaned heavily against the outer wall, feeling everything that held him together swaying and complaining about the inertia and topspin placed upon him. She still stood in the corner, finally taking her stone hand off the blackened handle. Carefully, he edged up to her, feeling that possibly it was safe enough for him to come see the final product.

Just as he came right behind her, she turned to look at him, ensnaring him in a cold icy gaze. He stood as still as if he was frozen. There was something to be said, wasn't there?

“Um, I thought you might be done?”

Lucas nodded, letting him pass to see the crucible in front of her. Within the black nest sat a spinning disk, still more opaque and dusty than what he knew of the planetary systems, so maybe it was more of a rudimentary form of it. Zooming in, he could see sparks chipping away as pebbles crashed into each other to make larger rocks, their cores would be slowly differentiating over time with the heaviest ones falling to the center of gravity and the lighter ones to the outside layers. How were those sparks of heat created? Were they created in the same way that his mother or Charles did? How did they do it?

“Is it different from normal?” He asked. The stone pillared woman grunted, moving off to the other side of the room. “Like how the star isn't yellow? Or even orange?”

“Asha’s stars are primarily red,” she said.

“But she also said that they tend to be on the more fussy ends of things, even if they last a lot longer,” he spoke up.

Lucas turned her head, letting him catch a peek at the blackholes that were her eyes behind that veil of clouds that she called hair. “Do you have a problem with that? Didn’t you say that you would scam?”

Simon knit his brows. Surely there was something else that would be here apart from the pretty light show, even if it had already satisfied his desire to see beauty in every creation. Lucas had to have something here that he could incorporate into his future designs! Anything at all! He drew his gaze across the transparent flasks. “I just have one more question! Just a small, tiny, insignificant one!”

“Hmph,” she grunted, not turning away from her table top. Simon saddled a little bit closer to his perceived enemy and current teacher.

“Could you show me how to make those flasks? And how you get them so transparent? They’re just so beautiful, just like all of your work, and I feel like it could be something great for me to take to share with my mom!” He tried to do his brightest voice in the world, nearly on the point of breaking into shards of impaling happiness, sickeningly sweet.

“No,” she said gruffly. “Don’t make me drop you off somewhere again.”

“Don’t make me stick to you again-” she glared at him and his voice dropped off into quivering once more. “- And I want to show my mom that we can get along, and just having me a bit longer can show her that! Just imagine how happy you would make your daughter otherwise!” You, sir, are getting better at bribing people.

Lucas focused on him, giving him an unnerving stare that was more uncomfortable than the loathing hatred before. He gulped, weaving his fingers together to try to mitigate the nervous energy. "Wouldn't that be great?" he asked, keeping one ton of his energy to keep him from bouncing up and down or making a fool of himself. Good job, you haven't run away yet! Keep going.

Slowly, each move taking what feels like ages, she moved from her workbench, spinning away the beautiful marbles that she had been applying paint to. "Help move this," she beckoned him back to the crucible.

"The planetary system? You can move that?" he asked, jogging behind her.

She shrugged, quickly shoving her hands beneath the lip of the disc. "Otherside."

Simon nodded, taking the other side, feeling the intense heat of the new birth climbing and accelerating all over him. The huge amount of energy that was poured into this, no not just the energy but the matter! How long would this thing last? It made him think about how long the lifetime of his own system would be. The two of them hefted the disc out of the anvil-like structure and brought it to the entrance of the black room, and there it disappeared from their hands.

"Where did it go?"

"It's a galaxy," she said. "Its local cluster, its nest."

"Nest?" he asked, following her back into the anteroom, blinking a few times after the extreme change in light. "Like the ones that animals build?"

"No." She tapped against a stone wall and a square within it disintegrated. He watched wordlessly as she took a handful of the sand and brought it to the crucible.

"What is that?" he asked

“Silicate.”

“Oh,” he said, following her a little bit closer behind, certain to not get knocked back again. “But that’s opaque and rough, whereas…” he gestured to above.

A small sneer crept up her face, sending slight chills down his back. Just what was she going to do now?

Without a word, she threw the sand into the stand, then kneeling to the bottom, she took a chunk of black brittle carbon and tossed it into the bottom hole, with a snap of her fingers she lit it aflame. So much could be done with fire... why couldn’t he figure it out just yet? Just like teleporting, he thought bitterly. Lucas stood up, watching the grains of sand turn to a burning orange, then liquifying and coagulating into a red fiery puddle. Bubbles of the molten liquid rose to the surface and gave a loud pop, making him flinch. A snicker came from his guide, as he quickly averted his gaze away.

A hollow tube materialized in her hands, spinning it gently, she put it between her mouth and the crucible. The bottom end was dipped into the churning spurting dangerous stuff, lifted out to see a bubble already forming. He looked back to Lucas, to see her cheeks puffed up, heat coloring her white face red with heat, adding much needed life to her stiff build. Going back to the slowly growing bobble, it puffed up, the star red turning towards more the color of a neutron star, growing more and more transparent as the sides thinned out as the volume grew. It was almost like a red giant, cooling off as more and more surface area was acquired.

The heat started to leave her face, and there was a sudden chill clearing into the air. The temperature was steadily dropping, all color leaving the glass surface glossy, translucent, and smooth. Simon stared at it. It resembled a lot of things in his work, but it was probably the first time he saw it as hard and as sterile as rock.

“Now get out.”

He flinched. “But-”

Then he found himself sprawling out onto the grassy hill, the glass vial rolling down next to him. In a moment, she phased out of his sight. Simon blinked, looking up to the dark night sky with no wonderful stars or galaxy bands across it. Only Lucas’s great white palace that stood blank against the black background, overpowering anything that could have possibly been out of place. Not even clouds to share the space. Energy had left his side, leaving him limp and dejected on the soft grass, hearing the waves lap at the shore. A single thought leaving his mind, asking how he would give his creation the gift of melting metal and sand.

Part 4: Pink Peonies and Orange Poppies

Chapter 11

“ The red poppies swarmed the field, filling her head with the feeling of sleepiness. Her legs swung outwards, and with each step, she swayed. A thick blanket settled over her mind, covering each thought in warm honey. Her footsteps grew heavier and heavier, thumping hollowing on the ground as the scent of the flowers flowed into her head. After another step forward, she fell onto the ground and slept.”

- A retelling of The Wizard of Oz

He had brought the flowers into the garden. Climbing vines took over the pink spines of his mother’s thick trunked roots out in the distance, green overtaking the vibrant reds. Over the side of the house, the pastel roses clung to the purple and brown planks, letting their thorns hook into the grooves and knots left from their prior stalk forms. Yellow and white buds dotted the grass, their petals dancing in the cool ocean breeze. Simon leaned heavily against the porch post, watching his work waltz, a rainbow of various colors in a symphony of chaos and creation. A warm cup of tea was held within his hands, a floral mix of different berries muddled, dried, and rehydrated with boiling water.

A particularly prominent tree sat at the border of the glade, a brilliant crab apple with gray scarred bark, causing a neverending cascading shower of soft white petals, covering the grass beneath a thick blanket of warm pollen-infested snow. He may have gone a little bit

overboard with his project of angiosperms. However, his mom liked them, and that made him happy. Their colors made him smile, to fill him with warmth and gracefulness, to take a love with the beauty of the interlocking thin forms that worked to hide the stamen and pollen. It also took his mind completely away from his main project, which sat in the works, each generation growing closer to his final goal... creating people to interact with.

There was a checklist of things that were slowly being worked down on. The social aspect was currently being worked on in tandem with the rest. They needed to walk on two legs, be able to handle tools, melt sand and metal, and live together as he and his mother did. He wanted them to look at these flowers, these flowing green vines climbing up towering giants with thick branches stemming out from the center, and to be amazed. He wanted them to love him and to find beauty in the world he created.

He surveyed his and his mother's work one more time before bouncing down the stairs, walking briskly through the paths that wound through thorny brambles, mulch beneath them slowly decomposing, small mushrooms popping up from beneath. Deciduous and evergreen trees loomed overhead, casting a soft green light, filtered from their thin leaves and canopies. It would have been nice to just spend the day walking around like he usually did, but he could hardly keep Charles waiting by the beach.

Simon breached the edge of their forest, a briney wind sweeping past his face, the tall stalks of grass and dandelions swaying back and forth. Pink and green swirling together with small dots of yellow and purple flowers. Picking his way down the chalk cliffs, His friend's black silhouette could be seen, sitting serenely on the sand beach, the white pebbles and dead matter collected and pulsed down to a fine powder. "Chuck!"

The man's masked head jerked upwards, roused from a peaceful sleep. His electric blue eyes lit into existence behind his tinted goggles. "Ready to go?" Simon asked, bounding to his side.

His friend nodded slowly, shaking sleep from his head, getting up from his stone seat. "It will do me some good to get out and move."

"Has something been happening back in the mountain?" he asked, bouncing from foot to foot, wanting to keep his energy and momentum going. "Did you need help?"

"No, not at all. Just tired is all."

Simon stood still for a moment, "I've been seeing Lucas come overhead more often nowadays. Has she been harassing you?"

Charles said nothing, brushing nonexistent chalk dust from his black cloak. "Shall we go?"

The boy paused for a moment, and said, "Yeah, let's." A black gloved hand was placed upon his shoulder and then they disappeared from the garden's shore.

"What were you thinking about doing this time?" Charles asked as the surface of Simon's planet came into view. The white poles were growing and the continents were a jumbled mess, separated by oceans, coagulating into other different formations.

"Not entirely sure..." Simon thought, moving away from his guide's grip, treading the space and thin gas lightly. "Take stock of any changes that may need to be made as the environment shifts. It's been getting colder and colder these past few times. Glaciers have been advancing."

Charles nodded, turning his gaze back to the oceans and tropical line that made up the closest part of the planet towards its resident star. "Going to check on your main project?"

He laughed, "Of course, it would be a waste of a trip not to."

His friend chuckled. "When do you want me to pick you up?"

"A full day cycle should be enough time," he said, "This time after one rotation."

"Got it. I suppose I will."

"You will go see the corvids again?" Simon looked back to Charles who at that moment turned away in bashfulness. He could have laughed in that instance, but that was probably too teasing at this moment. "I'm happy that you like them. They were made for you anyway."

The man turned his face back to him, his blue eyes glittering in the harsh starlight.

"Thank you again. For making something soft for my hard world."

"No problem. You shouldn't be the only person giving gifts anyway. I'll be seeing you then."

"See you," he heard Charles say as he drifted down to the surface. He pulled up on his downward trajectory, causing a tail to spurt up on the ocean surface, disturbing some fish that swim in the water column. Their silver bodies darted willy-nilly in their schools, perfectly organized as if a cloud of crystalline structures that held a fluid state, beautiful and a good way to stay safe against the nearby predators.

Maybe it was a good day to check out the warmer waters of shallows, or perhaps coral reefs. That would be a small pitstop compared to what he was going to focus on. To go see jellies, eels, and brightly colored colonies that made themselves into homes for amazing environments. No anoxia should be occurring right now, and no extreme algae blooms, so the sight should be spectacular. Or, he could drift to the chaparral of seashore valleys, with their tough bushes and hardy weeds. If this was just after the cold season there would be beautiful buds of white, orange, and purple appearing on the hillsides that enclosed such places.

He shook his head, as much as it would be a wonderful joyride, it would rather be one step at a time and many at that. To keep his eyes on the prize, to reach what he wanted most, and for that, to go to the innermost jungles. Go to the equator, the center of the main continent. He stretched, arching his back, feeling the cool air from the outgoing wind across the calm ocean. He sprinted off, letting water jet off of each step, causing a rainbow to rise from behind.

Simon went over the reefs of a solo continent, to jump over small islands, the perfect playgrounds for experimental evolution, to the chaparral of the southernmost coasts, to the desert, and then to plains, then the innermost rainforest.

Muggy air filled with insects and giant ferns took root here, enjoying nearly pre-impact conditions. It was almost like a eulogy for his past giants, only for their footsteps to be filled up with milk sucking animals. He stopped, knowing that he was close by, but they could have moved to more fruitful hunting grounds. A dragonfly landed upon a spiraling frond, enjoying the cool air that rose from the meandering river below.

Birds chattered up in the higher branches, exchanging a fury of information. The interlaying of sounds and pitches corresponding to mating rituals, resources, and territories. He touched down onto the mulched floor, arthropods scittered away, the dead matter crunching beneath his gentle feet. Looking upwards into the canopy, there were small green monocots hanging daintly from stunted stems. A small rodent-like creature with striped black and white fur bounded along the thicker branch, causing its prey to bob in the air. Their prehensile tail acted as a balancing mechanism as its tiny hands grappled, then nabbed one of the fruit.

Simon watched silently, paying attention to how the joints flexed back and forth. The tendons stretched beneath the thin layer of skin and fur. The adept use of the digits allowed for increased dexterity. Previously there was a need for claws, wings, or stickiness in order to scale

the large trees. His mind wandered further, thinking about the other possibilities already coming to fruition!

The tail curled around the branch securely as the fruit was cracked upon the home trunk. The creature's forward facing eyes focused on him as it brought its prey to its oversized incisors, stopping for a moment in its actions, thinking for a moment, then jumped away to further branches. He blinked.

Did they not like how he looked in this block of nearly solid color? None of them had reacted like that before? A hollow had started to set within him, but he quickly shook it away. No, he had to continue into the forest. Yes, the hands had worked, but what about his other models? Or on a larger scale?

The floor began to grow darker as the canopy above escalated. More and more branches clambered to acquire light above their competitors, depriving the undergrowth of much needed energy. Moss and fungi clung to the dead, slowly disincorporating and returning the nutrients to the soil, supplying the quickly growing giants. There were small passing thoughts, asking him, could he put some of his energy into these trees, and how much faster would their metabolism be? He had seen his mother do a similar thing in their garden. Of course, there was the application when they needed to test future models before putting them out into the field, or if they were just impatient, which was most times. No... it would probably be best to let them grow in their own time.

Long before, the chittering of the birds had disappeared, but now another chorus took its place, lower and slower paced. There were long hooting calls echoing back to each other. Knowingly, Simon looked up and sure enough there sat his continuing project.

They were smaller than his mother and Chuck, more around his size. Dark dense fur lined their spindly limbs. Their short torsos were nearly comical in comparison. The large hands grappled against the branches, pulling themselves up. A few of his projects sat on the ground, picking at each other in a grooming ritual. Relationships were readily being fleshed out. Matriarchal positions became clear. The moms held their children closely on their back, picking at fruit and bugs, hand feeding them. The little one's bright black eyes peered out, taking stock of the new, lovely world surrounding them.

Their faces were expressive, lacking the dense fur that covered the rest of the body. There was a superficial resemblance to that of his mother's reactions. The building of close familial connections was evident as they exchanged short and stunted conversations. Layers and layers of previous personal histories, subtleties, and built-in cultural mannerisms, ingrained over periods of generations mimicked that of their predecessors, of him and Asha.

He sat quietly, a little bit farther away where they wouldn't notice him. It probably wasn't the most opportune moment for him to start this interaction, to test his own integration. A voice popped up in the back of his mind asking, 'When'. Quickly a line of reasons presented themselves, 'That this wasn't the final product yet,' or 'We should wait until I am certain about every move that I will do'. A small pinhole of guilt widened in him, saying that with his whole entire planet at his fingertips, why should he just stay here, making sure everything is going alright, rather than a single part. It wasn't fair.

Alas, his body wouldn't move from the spot. He stayed watching, mesmerized in the front room of his mind, while a river of thoughts moved in the back, small pockets of cataclysmic thought jumping out like flying fish, trying to tackle the soaring good and proud observations. I made this. He made these creatures. He made all of these. In that singular

moment, he felt satisfied, sitting in the jungle, with the predecessors of his magnum opus to come.

—

The resident star rose above the far horizon. Charles drifted overhead, stepping swiftly upon the rolling clouds of the northern hemisphere. His head kept on wavering, wanting to go back to the fluffy black birds that had kept him company those past few hours. Their feathers were so soft, their voices so talkative, each one carrying their personalities, bringing him small trinkets like rocks and leaves. Their bright black eyes twinkled in the bright sunlight, tilting their small heads in a questioning remark, curious about the greater world. He grinned at the fresh memory. What a wonderful gift, even when the pieces were so small. Simon had even made their faces look like his mask.

There was still the unbelievability that they had been made for him. They were so perfect, so sweet, and smart! Ah! He'd come back as soon as possible to see them again, never mind taking the little one back! It was such a gift to be here. That child had such promise, and he was doing amazing things with it. The clouds gave way to the shining ocean below, full of life. Slick bodies of marine life slipped in and out of view in their briny cover.

Next, he came to a broader continent. Over he passed stony water-driven mountains, making the inner valley dry and hot. Further in, where humidity began to climb, he came to the vast forests. This is where the project was, wasn't it? Wouldn't it be funny if he just saw a clone of Asha below him? Just out of nowhere? Charles chuckled, climbing down from the sky. It

would be a different universe with two of them, for sure. Maybe he would see himself... Would they have similar personalities or...?

Where was the little one is the question. Sure the dense trees were shady and nice to be under, but it did make finding someone quite the challenge. He stood atop the apex tree, raising his voice as loud as it could go. "Little one? Simon?" he called, his voice echoing against the empty sky.

No one came up to greet him. Maybe he didn't hear him? Descending beneath the canopy, Charles touched lightly on a thicker branch, beneath the nests of smaller ones. The visibility had dropped significantly. The wood underneath him shuddered, growing rotten in the humid air. Softly he jumped, looking back up to see where the decomposition was taking place where a large dark oval mark left. Sap started to spill from inside it, rushing to fix the current damage.

If Asha was here, she'd be able to fix it. The thoughts of corvids had long passed, leaving him knowing that he was a rolling wave of destruction in a carefully crafted ecosystem. If he found Simon, maybe he'd be able to fix it. More carefully, now, he picked his way through the interlocking wooden limbs.

"Aaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaa"

He quickly turned his head, it wasn't Simon, but someone was screaming. Who was it? It was a harsh, faint wailing call. Screaming pain and anger, possibly asking for help.

"a- a- a- a- a-"

Wasting no more time, his curiosity pushed him forward, following the on and off catcalls. Leaves wilted and curled as he brushed past. Below stones with vines carving their way

inside. Birds fluttered past, making way as he bounced for a single moment on a branch, causing it to become brittle and snap. The wailing voice became louder. Finally, he found the perpetrator.

A face was screaming, wrenching its jaw wide open. Massive canines sat at the sides of comb like teeth. The eyes were beady and black surrounded by pink sebecra. Its face was surrounded by dense black hair. Its snub nose flaring in uncontrollable emotion. Beneath its extended neck held an elongated body, its arms out of proportions with its small torso, falling on the floor. Its vocal cords, still giving off that painful hammering yell.

Charles' eyes focusing for a moment, he saw trails of red, creating dark and sticky pools on the creature's thick fur. Off to the sides, there sat smaller casualties, pink hands stood open to the sky with stretched arms. On the other, huddling of larger animals, some of them carrying heavy breasts. Oh stars... Just beneath the angry wailing, a rustle came from the side. Survivors, maybe? Not moving from his spot, he saw two eyes, multi-colored ovals encircling the others.

Simon sat staring at the perpetrator, blending in neatly to the shadows of the trees. Charles stood in the air, mind a blank canvas, the noise clouding over it. The little one looked so small among the fauna. It was like he was transparent again, right when Chuck first met him, shrinking into the background. Slowly, he circled around the clearing, avoiding anything that may give himself away, going over his friend, and then touching down from behind.

"Little one..." he said softly, raising his hand, wanting to offer comfort.

Simon jerked under his touch. Shuddering, the little one turned around, his eyes wide, but he said nothing.

"Ready to go?" Charles asked.

The inner pupils shivered, then the eyes blinked, and the head nodded slowly. The planet disappeared, as he took them away.

It was already dark in the garden. His feet scrambled for a moment, to find their resting place on the stone slabs nestled into the vibrant green grass. Without any warning, Simon fell from his grasp, curling up on the ground beside him, refusing to budge. Charles opened his mouth to say something, closed it, and looked over to the block of a moon above them, where no doubt Lucas was, then to the dark house ahead, lifeless and without its inhabitants.

“Simon?” he asked, taking another hesitant look over his shoulder to the white temple. “I can’t just leave you out here, okay?” He turned his head downwards to see his friend, not moving apart from the slight shivering. “Little one?”

Carefully, he moved his foot to tap him on the back. “Mmmm,” came softly from the dormant silhouette.

“Please?” Charles asked again. Why was he always here when Simon had tantrums? Whereas Asha when you needed her? “I don’t want to be stuck out here with you when Lucas comes around.”

“Nng,” Simon mumbled, finally moving a bit.

“Thank you,” Charles huffed, extending his hand out to help the little one up. “Let’s go inside then.”

“Mmg,” his small friend said, getting up from the ground, rubbing his eyes, then trudging back to the house as his feet hurt. Charles stared after him for a moment, before finally following inside, walking delicately on the stone slabs placed there for him.

Simon emitted a slight purple glow, bringing color into the otherwise gloomy abandoned home. Silently, Chuck waited by the doorway, only coming in when the lights were turned on, giving everything a warm yellow hue. On the table sat a lone mug, untouched with a red liquid

inside, cold as ice. The cutting board and knives are neatly put away. A large stew pot was forlornly left in the sink. There were signs of life, but obviously, half lived to a point.

The little one trudged over to the pink and green paisley couch, flopping on top of it, releasing a small cloud of dust to float gently in the air. "Want to talk about it?" he asked softly, listening to the creaking that his steps made on the old wooden floor.

There was no answer.

"Do you want a drink?" Nothing as well. As much as he wanted to stay, he wouldn't be staying for the carnage that Lucas would cause if she found him here. "Want any help at all?"

The wind blew past the leaves outside, the canopy of the garden shuddering. That strange weird cacophony made by a mother and child. Both were pretty strong personalities, dealing with their own problems while he was here playing placater to the both of them. How was that fair? Was that fair to any of them? His eyes wandered to the armchair sitting across from the sulking little one.

"Goodnight, Simon," he said softly, leaving.

Asha, he thought, don't leave him like this, wherever you are.

—

"Why go home so early?" Lucas asked. "You still have much to do."

Asha flicked her eyes up toward her mother. "Simon is waiting for me."

"Tch. He's so needy, you deserve better."

Asha flinched. The red rock on this planet was still so acidic. The atmosphere had been blown off so early due to the smaller size. Water had frozen up at its poles, as well as excess

carbon dioxide and oxygen. It couldn't even really be described as an atmosphere, but rather an exosphere. She ran over the details in a methodical rhythm, taking comfort in her own notations.

“Are you listening to me?”

“Of course!” She pepped up, trying to smooth over any possible hints that she was annoyed. “I just have to go home at some point. I am not suited to staying out in these...” She gestured to the red and orange dust and rocks that continued to the horizon, then shrugged.

“Surely you understand.”

“It's so pristine. And beautiful,” her mother said, placing a hand full of firmness and strength on her shoulder. “And I have given it to you. Don't you like it?”

“I do. I do... but how long have we been out here? Been out here, planet bouncing, checking my plans, and ensuring everything is going alright.” Asha took in a breath to keep herself from shaking. “And everything is good.”

“And I am giving you more space for your projects.” The hand squeezed to the point of near pain.

“Can we please go home?” The hand relented its place as Asha walked a little bit ahead. “And before you know it, we'll be back out here, doing our errands and having a grand old time.” She turned around to look at her mother's face, a blank expression with those dark voided eyes, and slightly raised eyebrows and parted stone lips. “Is that alright?”

There was no way that she could argue. It was such a sincere suggestion, with no way for a comeback to be made. All pieces were on the board, placed, and ready to swing into motion. Her mother's lips trembled for a moment. The white spider webbing on one side of her face could be seen through the shadow of her fluffy cloud-like hair. Asha bounced her weight from leg to leg.

“Since when did you not like what you were doing? What have I given you?” Oh dear... here we go.

“Mom, I love it. I just happen to have other things to do.”

“Then why don’t you stay?” There was a present firmness in that stoney voice. Pleading, no, begging for her to stay. It was a demand. This was getting mildly dangerous... maybe even to get into yelling.

“I want to go home and make sure Simon is okay,” she said, feeling heat release into her, casting her gaze to the ground.

“It is fine. It can take care of itself,” her mother said. Did she want to get into a fight today? Did Asha want to pick a fight after everything had seemingly gone so well so far?

Maybe she could just leave. She didn’t have to get into a lecture with Lucas. Charles was so lucky in the fact that he could just walk away when needed. He had the ability to jump... Was there any way that she could contact him? To ask him to pick her up, and take home. “If you won’t take me home, then I’ll find my own way.”

“*What?*” Abort, abort, abort, abort this mission immediately. Reset, resend, destroy!
“What did you say?”

“That I will ask Charles to pick me up, if you won’t,” she said, there was an audible crack in her voice. Ground yourself for star’s sake!

There was silence, then that great heaving coughing laughter. How long has it been since Lucas had laughed like that? It was a barrier breaking sound, causing avalanches of rocks to fall down desolate cliffs, a great shifting of dust into the air, to nearly sand storm proportions of visibility.

“What has he been telling you? I should’ve known that it would have been better if I chucked him into space again. But he just keeps on appearing.”

“Don’t you-” Asha started.

“Asha, my star, my daughter,” Lucas’ shoulders relaxed slightly, bringing her arms out wide, motioning for a hug. Her gaze softened to the consistency of clay. “He tried to steal your own child away. He kills everything he touches. What’s to say that he’s not trying to get close to you, to your son, to destroy everything you have?”

“I-,” she gulped, feeling like a sharp rock was stuck in the back of her throat. Pieces came together from the back of her mind. Dying grass, animals, and stars, to Simon running away to him, to him finding her helpless in her own self pity and weakness...

“Come, come,” Lucas beckoned her forward, pulling Asha into a tight embrace. There was a slight tinge of pain in her back, but there was a lot of love to share between mother and daughter isn’t there. Her heartbeat was still skipping along at a fast pace, but that was probably because of the newly gained perspective on her (faux?) friend.

“You’re sensitive, Ash. You care a lot. You do a lot, and want to get along with everyone. Me, Charles, and your star. But sometimes, you need to know when to set boundaries. Alright?” Their eyes met, pausing for a moment in the planetary silence. “You obviously seem to be upset by this revelation. I will take you home, alright? Let you think on it.”

She blinked, feeling her face beginning to tingle and struggle to find any semblance of reason for leaving. How long has it been since she was held so strongly? It felt safe, warm, and comforting. Tears started to tumble down her face, as her brows relaxed, her mouth open in a grimace. A silent sobbing started. Asha wanted to stay there forever.

Simon stared at the ceiling. A headache had set in after he woke up on the couch. Mom wasn't back yet. His bag of notebooks and stuff sat on the floor, neglected and scorning his hard work. He rolled on his side to face the back of the sofa, studying the intricate paisley. He could go do something... he could go plan for new creatures, or even to start a new project to finish in the day. But he didn't move. He couldn't.

Of course there was fighting over territory and resources. It was placed into them in order to get the fittest, strongest, most viable animals to survive. The most adaptable, and sometimes also the most traumatized ones. He had never been there to see the blood, to see the intense screaming and pleading for mercy, in the species. His insides churned, curling up and rotting like decaying leaves.

If that ideology/need was true in his own family, Chuck and him would've been discarded a long time ago in favor of the strength of Lucas. So, how could he fix it? He shut his eyes. Mental fingers flicked against scattered papers inside his head, prodding at possible suggestions. Selection of traits, to pass onwards to future offspring, but it needs to aid his plan and his project in their daily lives. Writing out may help. Alas he was glued to his seat, his mind threading information from one side to the other.

The children were held so warmly by their mothers. Everything for a moment was peaceful. The groups of them living together wouldn't stop. There would still be divisions in those groups as they got too large, to split off to find better space and more food. However, what about before that population limit? Intergenerational movement in society was already applied as the older mothers moved beyond the birthing pool to create extra hands and caretakers. Then what about the fathers?

There would still need to be a drive to procreate, still need competition, but it would have to be curved significantly. What was he going to do? If he erased a single thing that was imperative to their survival as a species... for them to still evolve, his project would be done for and he would have to start somewhere back at square one.

Maybe he should ask his mom for help, maybe she'd know what to do. Flickering back to the last discussion that they had over this project, he retreated from the suggested idea. All the thoughts circling around and around, felt overwhelming and sickly sweet, like an overload of fructose. The repeating imagery of the children holding onto their mothers... The black eyes staring out contentedly from their perch, knowing that they were safe where they are with mom. But why not the biological male relatives? Like how he went back to Chuck sometimes, (sure they weren't biological because there was no matter to share between either of them), and they would talk, discuss and play.

The males in the groups would always be fighting amongst themselves, looking for intercourse (didn't really matter if it was male, or female, as long as it was done), never really taking part in raising children. Questions started to flip upwards, unfolding longer chains of inquiries. How would he integrate it? In a mainly mimicry learning species, what pressures would he need to apply in order for it to get selected? What would the males do in those situations that makes them different from females? How would it be immediately effective after introduction... etc.

He flipped over to see the rest of the living room. He looked to the great armchair, covered in matching paisley patterns. The massive bookshelf filled with organized used notebooks sat next to it. Upwards, on the topmost shelf, sat the two portraits of Charles and

Lucas. They both looked regal and well organized in their perspective frames. With a groan, Simon moved his legs from the couch and let them hit the wooden floor with a thump.

Best to get started and to keep on moving. Slowly, he pulled himself away from his soft seat, feeling drained but at least ready to do work. He rifled through his stuff, pulling out the small red notebook. Flicking it open, his gaze rested upon the small sketches that he did of his project. Babies being carried by their mothers. Adolescents moving in the upper branches, picking at the drupes that hung from the trees. All of them enjoying the forever summer of the humid rainforest. He turned the page, setting a short stubby piece of charcoal against the page, he started to make a list of traits he needed to apply for.

It was night by the time his mother came back, and he hadn't moved from his standing position.

Chapter 12

“Laws of Interaction: 1st, understand the first moment of meeting the other person. Look at their mannerisms and behaviors. This is often best if you had previous time to study them, however, if it is imperative that you make the first move, then provide the most neutral/popular/general tone, then gauge reaction from there. After this step, adjust your behavior accordingly to suit your companion.”

- How to Make Friends, by Professor Asterix

“Give me one lunar cycle, okay?” Simon asked Charles after his mother had headed out once more.

His friend closed his eyes thoughtfully, tilting the chair back, and leaning upon the back legs. “What about Asha when she comes back, if she does come back in that time?”

“You can tell her that I’m out doing some lengthened observation,” Simon said, placing a small jar of jam into a pack. Thinking for a moment, he climbed atop the counter to grab his flint and stone.

“And Lucas?”

“Good question...” he paused for a moment before hopping down from the redwood top. “I’ll come up with something if need be. Ready?”

“Let’s go,” his friend said.

Simon made his way onto the plains of his planet, quickly saying goodbye to Charles. The great forest that had stood there previously had shrunken its borders, causing a miasma of dispersing animals, including that of his project. The ones that couldn't transition were no longer important to the end result, although he would perhaps check on them later.

He walked upon the air, skidding along. He had taken into account the rolling ice age, which caused more of an influx of the great beasts to grow in size from a surplus of resources and to thicken in blubber and insulation. The easiest changes were always the ones that were slow, allowing him time to calculate and take factors into account. Thick-legged horned beasts trudged slowly in the golden grasses. Just beyond in the bush, he saw a brown face peek out, its dark eyes landing on him for a moment, before disappearing once more.

Wasting no more time, he ran forward, pulling brisk wind into every step. This was his chance! His moment! Something he had worked so hard to conceive, and nearly to fruition! Not to mention that they were alone despite them being a social species! Soon, he overtook them, somersaulting forward from the air onto the hard drought ridden grass grass, he cut the scared little one off.

“Stop!” he shouted, hearing his own voices twine together and then coagulating in his hearing.

Its eyes widened, its generous mouth open in surprise, stumbling forward and falling to the ground. They sat together in a standstill, for a moment, before it vomited. Spewing a great steaming cloud of bile and stomach acid, it doubled over and retched. Its black hair near its mouth got caught in the rush, some bits of the previous meals clinging to the sides in large droplets.

Simon stood by, his mind tallying reactions to built-in nervous ticks. Vomit was caused by distress, being scared, or extreme, extreme disgust. If it was less so, then maybe a gag reflex to a lesser degree. Branching thoughts collided with him, standing there in paralyzation at the small thought, that maybe he looked disagreeable, or at least was such a surprise to initiate such an expression of distaste.

“Did I... I do something?” he asked quietly. Looking over to the small creature, the vomiting had ended to dry heaving, followed by heavy breath, falling on its side, gasping for breath like a dying fish. “Why are you having this reaction...” She may just not like how I look, that I’m different. “I don’t really want to jump to conclusions, so could you please just say?”

“Can you understand me at all?”

“Hello?”

He stared at the shivering huddling mass. There was enough of a self consciousness to recognize similarities between their forms. But- but maybe he came too early. He should have had more observation, there should have been more preparation! What was he even thinking going into this headfirst, acting like he knew what he was going to do! There was never a plan, only the continuation of impulses and thinking that he could flow alongside the outcomes, climbing gradually to where he needed to go! What an idiotic thing to do...

No! His mind was shocked into alert, pushing forward, continuing whatever mental barreling it had done previously. He could make progress with this! All he needed to do was to release her back to her group, her people, and that would be that! Success! Get observation from them, stars, he could even follow her to them. Yes! Yes, this was going to work out quite nicely, wouldn’t it? He turned back to his captive, saying, “Okay-”

There was an empty space next to the puddle of stomach acid, bile, and partially digested food. She was gone.

Oh burn it, he forgot that they moved at so much of a faster pace than he was used to at home. There was the audible movement of footsteps thumping against the dusty ground, alongside the rushing of the dry summer grass. Quickly, he bounced upwards again, pushing forwards into a sprint, taking full advantage of the lessened friction, quickly gaining upon his prey. But then his plan hit him, full frontal in thought. He was going to follow her back to her family and watch from afar, wasn't he? And that is where she was running to. Simon slowed down significantly, seeing the faraway biped dropping down onto its knees, heaving for breath.

That didn't feel great... did it? The heavy breathing of the lungs, the extremely fast beating heart, catching up on all the adrenaline in the world. He watched as it laid there until the resident star had set beyond the horizon, until it finally moved from a crawling position to standing. She turned her head, from side to side, probably looking for him, and then started to move on. Her gait had slowed significantly, still carrying forward with heavy thudding footsteps. He followed after.

She walked nonstop for a few days, only pausing for a drink or to look for food, sometimes peering over the side of her shoulder, making eye contact with him. She ran further after the first few times, but when she realized that he meant no harm, she slowed her pace. Far away, giant fauna grazed as smaller lithe predators watched. The woman would've been an easy target, but maybe it's because he was near her that they didn't come closer.

This was getting boring... she was the only specimen for miles, and she sure as stars wasn't going to get bolder. What if he did something to get her attention, to make her come closer that had to do with the stuff that he wanted to show her.

That night, while she was resting further away, he gathered dried grass and broken roots. Taking the spark and flint from his bag, minding the ring of very flammable material around him, he scratched a spark. Food. Food would bring her closer, she had barely eaten since the day that they first met. He could, of course, catch some sort of unsuspecting animal, relieve it of its mind in one deft blow, and then roast it, denaturing its proteins, preparing them for digestion. It was a simple enough procedure, as well as a good skill to show and for her to possibly learn. At least in theory.

Simon looked around, eyeing the bristly bushes, the stiff grass, and the harsh thorny trees dotting the horizon. Did he really want to kill something to make a point? Did he? Shaking his head from side to side, as if trying to get rid of any worried thoughts, he wished well for the next animal that moved his way, it would be their turn to go see Charles in the mountains. And, he reasoned, trying to shove any possible guilt away, they would probably be more comfortable there amongst long lost families, than fearing for their lives every day on his planet.

"I'm sorry, little one," he whispered, cracking a rock over the skull of the third lizard he caught. He made sure that it was quick and, hopefully, painless. The fire at this point had grown low. What had previously been dry twigs and grass had become a small pile of red hot coals. Delicately, he laid the thin corpses to rest on their burning bed.

Looking up, he saw the light glint on her eyes from a distance. She had come closer while he was preparing. "Want some?" he asked, waving at her. She backed away. Still too early to try to get her to watch him. Simon plopped down on the hard cracked soil, he just needed to play the

waiting game. That is what he did his whole entire life, just waiting until things came to completion, so how was this any different?

The difference was that anxiety caught up to him, holding his body to near mental destruction. The thought of running and fighting when there was nothing to do. He took in a breath and released it. He sat down, not thinking would help greatly, even though he was probably quite close to his goal. What would he try to do after she possibly came over? That wasn't even a certainty, but he was already depending on it.

The coals were starting to die down to a deep red with an occasional blue flame peaking out, flicking back and forth on the ashy carbon residue. The lizards' thin scaly bodies were now tattered and charred. Simon took one from its bed, and with a small snap akin to the breaking of a twig, he took off the head. The spinal cord was white, such a beautiful piece of work used to transmit information from head to toe. The flesh had broken down due to the heat, and smelled like something he would've found in Chuck's home, foul, degrading, and destroyed.

Carefully, he raised it to take a bite, feeling the flesh cleanly get broken, the twisting and breaking of the thin ribs, and the cutting into the tiny heart that had only pulsed a little while ago, causing coagulated blood to spurt and run down his chin. He saw the light glint off her eyes as they widened. So the showing of knowledge did work. Maybe she'd come just a bit-

He took another lizard in his other hand, and held it out, gesturing to her to come join him. Its limp blackened body flopped in his grasp, not the most appetizing thing in the world, but it should do the trick right? It's the substance that counts, not the presentation. She hesitated for a moment as she came forward into the quickly darkening light. He held his palm open presenting the reptile, and it was gingerly snatched away.

There was the crunch of the bones, the soft mushing and chewing of teeth, and ravenous gulping. He held out the last lizard, and it was taken from his hands, and devoured just as quickly. Simon looked down at his own piece, and gulped, finding that the desire for the performative aspect of eating was sorely misplaced. He studied his creation, feeling the back of his mind itch to sketch, draw or take notes. How often would it be that he was here eating with someone who wasn't his mother? Or just anyone, in general.

Her black hair fell around her face, messy, unruly, curls sticking to her face. Her cheeks were moving quickly as she chewed through the massive mouthfuls she took. He wanted to say something. He had to do anything! He wanted to show her how to make fire, to see her take it to others. He could say something, but what would she understand? How would he understand? A mounting frustration started to build up inside him, almost akin to what he imagined geysers did as they ruptured due to increased pressure and heat.

He turned his head as he heard the sandy ground crunch. His eyes met immediately with her dark brown gaze. She had come closer, so much so that he could see the small pores dotted across her skin, her cheeks were slightly pink, and her selegra a tinted brownish white. He was in fact so enamored with staring at his creation in the heat and energy that he didn't realize that her hands were so close that it shocked his torso.

Her fingers sent off screaming, terrifying noises as

Simon stood in monumental horror, his mind blinking from place to place, trying to absolve any sort of evidence that may have been had towards his project being corrupt, insulting, or an immeasurable disappointment. What did he want from this? Why did he do what he did? Why did he do all of this?

A lined up roll of reasons came from the tip of head all the way down to his feet. Whether it was to create something in the image of his mother, to make something indestructible, or to just- to just have someone to talk to. He stared at this woman. His eyes hurt, a blunt splintering pain, begging to be taken care of, for some sort of rest. What could he do? There was a point in time where no amount of fluidity or ability to just roll with the punches could solve a problem. What was he going to do?

Her brown gaze studied him. Her delicate, hardy hands raised up to frame his face. Stay still, stay still and admire the warmth that you put into your creation. Beckon yourself to witness your own work in play. His senses sparked into a paralyzing, electric fire after her palm brushed his chin. Her pupils grew and shrunk in focus, taking in new information with every passing breath.

Is this what he wanted? To be looked at and analyzed? No... No. He wanted something more akin to his conversations with his mother when they didn't just devolve into silent space, he wanted that free flowing force of conversations where it bounced from random entry to random entry, for the both of them to have laughter interspersed through talk. Here, and now, he saw his creation standing in the shadow of his mother. They shared the curly hair, a similar figure, the round, plaintive eyes, brown skin, and sweet share of curiosity. So here stood his creature, his creation, the thing that he had been waiting for so many years, wanting what he could not have.

So what did he want? That question in itself was such a quiet, cloying question. His gaze wandered away to look at the open horizon of the parched grasslands. He felt as dead as a possum, all feeling overwhelming to the point of indeterminable pain. If he had a heart, if he had

a mouth, if he had any burning physical features/mechanisms, would it be worse? Or would it be grounding?

Stars, he messed up. “Bye,” he said, leaving her nearly touching hands and open questioning mouth by skating away into the sky above.

When Simon had gotten far enough away, he looked at his work in all its nice comforting shades of greens. All of it had been done in his mother’s image, or to what he thought she’d like. He looked down at his trembling hands, they were nearly transparent, only the slightest tinge of purple could be seen. This would probably be the closest he’d ever feel towards death. Every choice that had been made... why? Why couldn’t he remember? From the fuzzy tails of the squirrels, to the familial dynamics to dolphins, or the singing of birds. Why? Who was he, or what was he even doing? The clouds rolled beneath his feet. The great plains with dried, harshed parched grass, yellowed at the ends but green at the roots. The seeds would soon be released to the upcoming winds. Fuzziness started to set in on the border of his eyesight as the breeze rocked him side to side.

He fell, his head turning towards the ground, feeling the air drop past him, as his consciousness did the same.

—

Lucas turned over a small silver ingot in her hand, it had been sanded down to perfection after a miniature sandstorm made multiple passes by. She watched her daughter dance lightly against the harsh, sterile, ground beneath them. She counted as the number of planets that they

needed to check went down, each one crawling closer to send both of them back home. Back to separation, isolation, and pure and utter boredom.

There was something tangible in the attention that she received from Asha. It was warming, enlightening, and felt cataclysmic when given where it shouldn't be. That isn't to say that she is in fact territorial in nature, for she was very understanding to a point. She could understand the desire for time to a person's self. She could not, however, understand the desire to go see someone else. For someone to place their desire over their own mother! It was heartless. She knew that Asha was not a heartless person, that she was sensitive, driven to help others around her.

Lucas twisted her head to the side, hearing an audible crack in her stoney facade, adjusting her viewpoint of her dancing child. Poor Asha, placed into a universe where people fight for her attention. It was as beautiful as a chunk of foreign crystal eroded and polished by time in a slow moving river. Warm lava pooled at the side of her neck, quickly cooling in the freezing atmosphere, scabbing over to leave a trail of hardened black rock.

It wasn't fair. It wasn't fair how her attention had been divided between three people. What could a mother do in such an unfortunate situation? Charles must be taken care of, for he'd squawk if he saw anything happen to Asha's star.

Star, she thought bluntly, how pitifully was the small revolution point. She was the blackhole of the galaxy compared to Simon. Propelling thousands upon thousands of planets into swinging turns. Lucas watched as Asha's green curls twirled with each movement covering her silt colored skin and white blouse, red iron dust splatters plastered over the front. A sweet, sincere smile, revealing chalk colored teeth. No, it simply wouldn't do, for her own system to be put out of adjustment due to imbalance. That led to calamity at times. Yes...

Asha started to make her way back along the ridges of the icy poles of the red planet. Lucas shuffled her feet, taking in a wary breath. Although, as a black hole pulled in its previous hosting planets, the surroundings and the neighbors, she supposed, she had a little bit more tack on picking and choosing who to deconstruct.

—

“Hey Simon!” A feminine voice shouted.

“Don’t you dare-,” a more masculine one chimed in.

He moved his head slightly, the light hitting his gaze enough to make him wince in bright white pain.

“See, I told you, you shouldn’t have woken him up. We shouldn’t have done that. Dad’s gonna get mad that we went here without his permission,” the masculine one said, carrying an older quality, trying to mediate from all sides. Simon opened his further eyes to see two small children sitting across from him on the steps of his mother’s porch.

“Oh shush you, what’s done is done anyway,” the feminine younger one. “And is dad gonna realize that we’re gone when he’s out? No? No. We’re fine, so stop worrying you burning technician.”

They both had wavy brown hair, although the girl had more blue tones, and the boy with gold highlights in his. They shared pale white skin like Chuck. “Simon~ you said you had cool stuff to show us, and guess what, disappearing on us again isn’t going to keep us from seeing it. And if you don’t tell us, we will personally ramsack all the cases in your shabby cabin till we

find it." She grinned, spreading her small hands as if she was showing off something great to the two boys. "What do you say, friend?"

Simon blinked, now elevating himself a bit more on the porch steps, the warm light from Lucas' temple felt searing to his body. "Do I- Do I know you?"

The girl looked offended, wrinkling her nose, her sleek eyebrows arched in horror. The boy seemed to be grossed out by his own companion's reaction, he had dark circles under his eyes.

"Momma's boy doesn't know who we are- Can you believe that? Can you, brother?"

"Okay- all right- no. Let's go home-" The boy loudly clapped his hands together, turning around on one foot, only to get yanked back by the back of his shirt.

"Let us introduce ourselves then," she flicked her gaze to her brother for a moment who had bared his teeth like he had something to say about this. "He's the technical one. And I am the one with the plan. You're the guy with the stuff. The star with all the sketches, ideas, and motor skills! Even though you can't get out of your silhouette form-"

"- You can't just say that about him, sister!"

"Why in burning stars not! There are no rules- there is no Lucas, Charles, or Asha to tell us what to do- we just keep on going as we always do." She turned back to the two boys, staring after her. "You gonna cry? You gonna tell?"

Her brother quivered for a moment, before thumping hard onto the wooden steps, pulling his legs up close to him, and burying his head to make himself into a neat little ball.

"Is he- is he alright?" Simon asked quietly, getting up slowly from his creaking sitting place beside him.

“Him?” the girl shrugged. “He always gets like this. Don’t worry, he’ll bounce back with a smile and a grin in an hour, not knowing that anything went wrong in the first place. Dad says that isn’t good, but, hey, if it cuts his whining, then its all the better, yes? Yes.” Simon stared at her in disbelief, feeling his eyes widen in disturbance. “Hey- I mean,” she shuffled her feet on the grass, turning her head away from his gaze, “It means less interference with us looking at your work right? So let's go inside already and do this!”

As she trotted up the steps, he took one last look at the other boy, whose head left wet marks on his pants. It could’ve been crying, but there was no audible sound at all, not even heaving breath. Just before taking the first step, he said softly, “Come in when you feel ready,” remembering the comfort that he felt Charles welcomed him inside.

Everything was a lot larger than he remembered. The taste of dust and the smell of sweet dirt filled his body with the feeling of home. His eye line fit with the top of the kitchen table, and he would have to scramble onto the chairs in order to match gaze with his mother.

“Is it over here?” Her voice came from the living room, but in the place of the comfortable sofas sat looming bookshelves, one row after another to near infinite. Looking down one of the chasms of notebooks, he saw her green skirt, embroidered with mushrooms, logs, spreading slime molds, and pill bugs. An enlarged hummingbird head hung at her side, like a morbid trinket of sorts, its serrated beak carved into a pointed, sharpened wedge.

Simon followed after her, feeling his stride lengthen as the distance closed. By the time he was beside her, he was able to see the top shelf with ease. The girl beside him was only a few inches taller, orange flecks sprinkled over her pale white cheeks and nose.

His red notebook stood out against his mother’s gray notebooks, all surprisingly labeled, categorized, and marked. “Yes-” his voice had gotten deeper, “- Here it is.” She eagerly snatched

it from its place, leaving its plain neighbors protruding slightly from what was originally a neat set up.

“Awe inspiring~” she smiled, flipping open, and letting the delicate pages flit by with the tip of her thumb cycling through. There was nearly a visible animation between all of the charcoal drawings, some more detailed than others. “Near the end right?”

“Yes- um. Its not done yet-”

“-Right!” She had said it with so much certainty, taking his arm in hand and leading him in the now shortened distance back to the kitchen.

Simon stumbled in after her, as she tugged at his arm, dragging him into the warm half light of the main area. As they passed the outside, he saw a man, more comparable to Chuck’s size, his arms still crossed over his knees, the furious shaking had stopped. His wavy dark blonde hair turned upwards into curved points, messy, but well kept. He turned to see his feminine guide, a fringe of dark brown bangs were choppy across her forehead, her smile was pulled upwards at the sides, but there was a tightness akin to stress or anger.

“So- you created them because you wanted to give something to your mother?”

“I did.”

“And you had a bunch of other reasons right?”

“Yes, I do.”

“Well, out ‘em,” she pulled out a chair from the kitchen table, slamming the notebook onto the scarred wooden surface. “Go on.”

“I want them to be adaptable, to move freely,” Simon sat across from her.

“Kay”

“And for them to be able to survive anything if they can.”

“Kay,” she shrugged, letting her head loll back over the top of the backrest

“And-”

“-Let’s be honest here,” she said, twisting her head back to look at him. Her green eyes met his, small twin flames were lit inside both of them, her previous smile was grinning so much that it showed her gums and canines. “You’re doing this because you have mommy issues, and wanted to talk to someone. And you didn’t want to straight up ask Asha about it, but decided to play the long game, hoping that your gift will make her stay with you.”

Simon blinked. “What?”

“Tech, switch!”

And in that moment, the brother was where the sister was. His face was softer despite its masculine features. Orange eyes with dark eye bags beneath them, half lidded like he was tired with life and its surroundings. They were hidden by the longer wavy dark blonde bangs. His smile was smaller, more veiled. “You must love her very much.”

Simon shifted in his seat. “Well yes... why are we talking about this?”

“Because what you wanted previously isn’t going to work,” the man in front of him said softly. He laid his large hands on the table, swishing them back and forth across the worktop, opening them towards the sky as if to show something off that wasn’t there previously. “You want to replace someone that is irreplaceable. And a show of devotion or affection, just won’t cut it.”

Simon took his foot and laid it to the inside of his thigh, twisting his other leg around the chair’s leg. “I’m not replacing anything.”

“Please, Simon,” the man laughed, small wrinkles appearing at the sides of his eyes.

“You made someone in the image of a person that you love dearly. Whenever she is not apart of

your day, or you feel like you may disappoint her, or that she may disappoint you, you feel upset."

"Ha!" Simon bleated, banging his hand against the table, "so what would you suggest then? Wouldn't you do the same? If your sister ran away from you too?"

He had let out a small sigh, tenting his hands together, resting his chin upon them. "I can't say that I haven't done the same in thought. But it solves nothing. Creations do not understand their creator. It's an impossibility due to your extreme knowledge of their inner workings, and them knowing nothing of yours. It's a power imbalance." His orange eyes glinted in the golden hour light, watching small dust particles drift gently through space. "The best that you can do is to go back and state what you want. Because Asha wouldn't know otherwise. Your mother wouldn't know otherwise."

Simon stared at him. "I-," he sought for a comeback, for some sort of defense. His previous interaction with his creation, supplied the facts. His inability to say when he was tired, distressed, or just wanting to talk to his mom also supported the argument. Nothing came up until he broke down. "You can't be serious."

"I know it's going to be hard, but it will help. You don't have to do it immediately when you see her, you can build up to it even. You just need to do it."

He gulped, seeing the light quickly fade from the walls, leaving them in semi-darkness. "Stars..."

"So- what are you gonna do, bud?" The brother and sister were there together. A faint orange and green light bounced around them. The sister leaned against the backrest, her eyes glowing in unison with her brother, who was in the same previous position.

“Simon! Bud!” he was gently shaken back to consciousness to see his mother’s smiling face above him. “Don’t worry! He’s all good!” She laughed, turning her head away, calling to an unseen spectator, who he was guessing was Lucas. Her curtain of green curls tickled his face, as she asked, “Ready to go back home?”

He sat up, and sure enough, he saw the stone pillar of a woman standing a little bit away, her voided out eyes, staring after the duo. “How about it, bud?”

“My stuff?”

“Collected and prepared for!” Asha grinned, standing up with jerky motions, like anxiety had melded strings to her joints.

“Chuck?”

“What about him?” There was a slight change in her voice, causing it to darken slowly. “Don’t you like it that I came to pick you up instead? A bit of a family get together.”

Simon blinked up at her. Should he say something? “Chuck is family.”

“Is he, though?” Asha shrugged. “Come on, let’s go!” She offered a hand, which he grabbed and was pulled to standing. She smiled, and that made him feel better.

“Mom?” she called. “Ready?”

And they were off, back at the beach that led up to their garden.

“I’ll see you later, okay, mom?” Asha asked, turning back to her mother. Simon watched the two of them have their stilted movements, mildly wondering what he missed. There was a stiff hug, and the stone pillar woman was floating back to her pristine, hard, and solitary temple.

She switched back to him, her face relaxed and sweet. “It’s been a while since we had dinner together, hasn’t it?”

He nodded, “It has.”

“Shall we, bud?” She gestured to the stone staircase in the distance.

“We shall,” he half sung, bouncing after her on the beaten sandy shore.

The crunching of their footsteps juxtaposed with the rhythmic breaking of the sea beside them. He could hear his mother talking, doing what she did best in quiet situations, which was to ramble. But there was a blemish amongst the chalky cliffside. A nearly perfect black circle of obsidian, where he was sure that Charles’ entrance used to be. Its glossy sheen was mirrorlike in comparison to the rest of its opaque surroundings.

He shook his head. Nothing bad would’ve happened from this, and mom loved Charles in general. So no, nothing bad has happened. Blissfully, he followed after his mother from the stone steps to the green grass and strange melding of their creative ideas into a single cohesive garden.

Chapter 13

“ And so humans were created, but there was an everlasting flaw made in our design, carted from our original creator. It's the ability to misunderstand, to assume, to cry and still feel disconnected from the world. He had given us the worst thing possible, hope for connection, but the inability for it. He had truly made us in his own image, but in that he also couldn't partake in us as much as his own family. And that in itself, killed him.”

- On the Theory of God by Schultz Quagmire

Simon sprinted across the garden, knowing that he wouldn't have much time to put his plan into action. He wanted everything to be perfect, to be sweetly done. To please. The letter was already put into place, and he had made sweets. The last step, that he wanted to execute perfectly, was the decoration. It wasn't going to be too much, but it wouldn't be too plain. Ripples watched him from the edges of the glades and paths, clearing out as he barreled past. Their beady black eyes curiously observing his actions.

He could take from the wild roses, the orange bobbing poppies, to the infinite white daisies that popped up from random seeds in the grass. He could even peruse the first strange flowers that gave way to the first fruit in the garden, orangish red and crownlike in nature. But

no, none of them held her energy that she used to bustle around the garden, none matched in color of softness, apart from one.

There bunches of fluffy pink flowers sat, nestled amongst arrow shaped leaves. Their pink petals surround the neon yellow stamens within. Peonies. He took out Asha's shears and deftly removed a few of the heads, with enough stems to act as handles when he moved them back to his working place. He took them up into arms, balancing them with the shears and bounced along the path back to the kitchen table where all of his bits and pieces were laid out.

He had been practicing glass making since he saw Lucas make some. Although there were still improvements to be made. A nice discovery he had made recently was the application of certain elements allowing for more colorful varieties. He added cobalt to this specimen, letting one colorless and the colored one swirl together but not completely mix to create a wonderful pattern fit for the vase that he wanted. He took his creation off of the table, filling it up with water from the sink.

He arranged the peonies as nicely as possible within it, making sure to put the most brilliant and fluffy pinks in the front, with the more vibrant reds towards the center. When he was satisfied, he sat back and looked. He had folded his letter in half, propping it up on its open side. His best try at a fancy script on the front said 'Mom'. A few ceramic jars filled with the red jam, were placed aside, waiting to be partaken from.



To Mom

There was a crunch of the grass that led to a thudding upon the porch. A sudden urge to jump and hide, to see her reaction from far away, nearly took him, but instead, he turned, “Welco-” A thin sheet of fear broke over his head.

Lucas stood in the doorway, her blacked out eyes with the small specks of stars and arcing galaxies waltzed within them. Her hair rolled, the edges dissipating and recollecting as if taking humidity from the air and cooling it with her chilly facial expression.

“You must leave.”

Simon blinked, slipping from his seat, although still leaning heavily against it. “What?”

She repeated again, “You must leave.”

She still stood in the doorway, blocking up the light given by her temple. He twisted his head slightly to see if his mother was standing a little ways back. But there was nothing apart from the underlying darkness below the trees and brambles, or the small flowers dotting the glade.

“Why?”

“Because I ask you to.”

“Where’s my mom?”

“Leave.”

“And if I say no?” he asked, his feet had shifted to a more firm standing position. There was a visible break in her face as red spiderwebs interweaved beneath. What could she do in this moment?

She took a step towards him, her solid legs of stone, were heavy against the creaking wood, it would probably splinter at any moment. “**Leave.**”

“You didn’t answer my question!” He took a step back, feeling his back hit against the chair.

The spiderwebs opened further, letting a thin dribble of lava move over her cheek bone and rippled over her mouth. “**Leave.**”

“**Leave, leave, leave, leave, leave, leave, leave,**” her mouth spoke over and over again, with each one, she took a step forward, coming closer and closer. The word became a fluid garbled mess as the lava spilled into her mouth, sticking from her upper and lower lip like freshly ejected mucus.

He sidestepped the chair, edging a little bit further away, hoping to not give away much ground. What could he do? He could run around until his mother returned, but she couldn’t return without Lucas due to not being able to teleport. He could try to escape to Charles, but Charles' tunnel was sealed off. He could- He could. What could he do? Where could Lucas not follow. Nowhere. Nowhere in the world, universe she could not follow where anxiety would not eat him up and make him look backwards to see if he was about to be smashed into a thick squirming mess.

What would Charles do at this moment? What would Asha do? He bolted for the door, turning the chair over on its side in a clash, distracting her for a moment, and he jumped down the porch steps, ignoring his feet scrabbling on the grass, losing friction, but picking up momentum again as he sprinted past the edge of the glade, and past the brambles, not stopping for a single moment in case she were to catch up, probably teleporting in incremental distances, ready to pick him up at any moment, to fling him to the side, to rupture him apart from the inside, to make him leave, to leave him floating in space where no one could ever find him.

He found himself at the chalky cliff face, putting hard brakes on his feet, slipping for a moment at the edge. He turned back for a single moment to see his predator above the canopy, her drape style clothes, catching the wind, reminiscent of the first time he saw here, where she was positively ethereal, a creator in all terms above him and his mother, the only thing off putting being the thing red lines, lining her jaw, dripping onto the grass beneath the both of them, sizzling and sputtering the grass into tiny blue red flames. He looked over the side of the cliff, seeing the tide had come in, crashing against the white background with a dark grainy blue. How deep was that? No, not even that, he couldn't die, he wouldn't die to that, not to anything, so why in the world was he worrying, just do it, just run away, survive till mom.

He jumped.

The shock of cold water overtook all consciousness, making him feel like he was freezing, burning, and twisting akin to the battling caterpillars over taking a leaf with chemical warfare. Lucas disappeared in the film of bubbles that shook over his plummeting head, and in that moment, relaxation had taken his head, asking him to not worry, that he will be safe, that he will be back soon, and that he was fine. His vision faded to black as he bounced for a moment along in the current, getting swept away from his home's chalk cliffs. He smiled. Goodnight, mom.

Epilogue

Asha waved goodbye to her mother, bouncing up the steps of the stone steps that were indented on the side. She'd get to see her star!

She could imagine his happy eyes looking up at her. No one would be able to steal them from her, and they were the most precious thing in the world. His voice, the questions he asked, his creativity, his love. She whistled to the ripples standing at the edges of the paths, but they didn't move as much as usual. Maybe they're tired.

When she got to their home, the door was left open ajar. A sudden spike of fear hit her. "Bud?" she asked, coming inside. There was a slight dent in the floor and a chair on the ground, a thin crack through one of the legs. "Simon?"

Her gaze followed from the carnage to the beautiful vase and flowers sitting so elegantly on the worn out table. Maybe she should make a new top for it, out of the trees Simon tried so hard to create. Then the word Mom stood out to her. She picked up the piece of parchment, unfolding it.

Dear Mom,

Hello there! You may be wondering why you're reading this in the first place. I wanted to say thank you, and how much I appreciate all that you have given me. I understand that we have both been kind of unstable since I witnessed an impact on my planet. I didn't really take steps to make it better, so I am going to do that now. Please know that you are the best mom in the

universe, and I am the luckiest kid. I know that we have had our fights, disagreements on our creations, and problems in the past.

After reflecting recently, I have grown distressed over the lack of time that I have shared with you. You are often disappearing to work on your planets, and I of course get sucked into my own projects, but I would like to discuss how we could possibly work in tandem. Or at least, bond a little bit more.

I hope you will consider it.

Love you, Mom!

Sincerely,

Simon

Asha looked up from the letter, and looked at the bundle of fluffy pink flowers, the small jars of jam, and the abandoned chair. “Simon? Bud?”

No response. Maybe he had gone off somewhere? But then he wouldn’t have left the place in such a state. There was visible distress, so unless, unless...

Charles... she went outside, to see spots of burned grass. “Simon?” she called a little bit more loudly. Where did her star go? Would he- would he actually steal him from her? No... unless Lucas was right.

“Chuck?” her voice began to quiver, the ripples had even stopped moving. The air was still, causing no foliage or flora to move. “Come out! Tell me whats happened! Simon!”

He would. He wanted what she had. He wanted kids, he wanted company, and was so burningly clingy. He was fond of Simon, nearly claiming him as his. He had wanted him, he had sheltered him during his fight, he had supported him! Mother was right! She was right!

And now he wasn't here to defend himself, probably having a good time with her star, right now. Her heart rate had skyrocketed, her legs moving quickly towards the cliffside, back to where her and her mother had sealed up the tunnel. He must have had another entrance far away. One where she couldn't find it. How could he- how could he do this to her?! Take away the thing that she adored the most!

"Come out! You coward! Give him back! Give him back!" she yelled, at the mountain, hoping that in some way that her voice would be carried back to that traitor. The water lapped at the sand, carting away miniscule granules. It was loud, it was too burning loud. Stop it, stop it, bring him back, give him back give him back give her back her star! Give her back her treasure, her precious, her center of the universe! Pounding grew at the back of her arms, begging for release, and she swung at the near perfect circle of obsidian, causing it to flake away at the center, she hit again and again and again, "Give him back! Give him back! Give him back! Give him back! Please, Charles! Please, please someone, someone, anyone, bring him back to me."

Her swings faltered as she came down to her knees, feeling herself starting to crumble from the previous energy. "Simon, where did you go?" She whispered softly. "Come back to me, please, please, come back."