except in this form in which I am not nor are you

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by greywing (ctrlx)

Summary

An AU in which circumstances bring together the lives of Delphine Cormier and Shay Davydov prior to the events of canon, an unlikely friendship is struck, and nothing afterward is quite the same.

(This story appears on tumblr under the heading "Shay - Delphine AU.")
Part I: Delphine and Shay

Delphine almost drank too much that first dinner when Shay, much more petite, signalled an early end to the refills of her glass by covering the top with a hand. "Reds can be a bit strong for me."

"So I must finish this bottle myself?" Delphine asked, a bit archly.

"I have to drive," protested Shay.

"As do I," Delphine said. She gave the bottle a little shake. "Have one more glass. Help me."

Shay sighed. "Half a glass. But I might need to do coffee or something afterward."

Delphine smiled as she poured, eyeing a conservative half a glass under Shay's squeamish observation. "It is Friday, at least."

"That's not what I'm worried about," Shay said.

Delphine quirked a brow. "You should have said something. I would not have ordered a bottle."

"Usually I'm okay with whites," Shay explained, swirling the wine in her glass. "I think I underestimated how hard the wine would hit me."

"You ate so little," admonished Delphine lightly.

"No, I ate enough, thank you, Doctor," Shay countered. "I do study nutrition."

"That's good. You have to be mindful to get enough protein as a vegetarian."

"Pescetarian, actually," corrected Shay. "How did this become a conversation about my diet? I didn't think that was your field."

Delphine chuckled. "It's not. And it is possible you are not the only one feeling the wine. I may have also underestimated its strength."

Shay gestured expansively. "See?"

Delphine's mouth pulled in one direction to form a half-smile, not agreement or admission, but acknowledgement. "Usually I am mostly unaffected by wine but tonight—" Delphine shook her head. "I don't know."

Shay smiled, expression soft in the restaurant's lighting, and Delphine was struck by the realization that so many of their conversations were conducted without facing one another. "I'm glad you called."

Delphine picked up her glass and nodded slowly behind its cover. "I'm glad, too. I enjoyed this. It's been . . . not difficult adjusting to living here, but . . ." She shrugged. "Busy. I didn't realize I haven't taken many breaks."

Shay's smile turned sideways. "I know what you mean. I was a prairie girl and moving to a big city was . . . a bit of a shock."

"Prairie girl?" Delphine repeated. "What does that mean?"
"Think lots of open grasslands. And terrible winters."

Delphine nodded. "I have heard about Canadian winters."

Shay laughed. "Yeah, well, prepare yourself. I take it they weren't so bad in . . ."

"France?" Delphine finished. "In Paris, not so bad. There is snow, but not so much."

"I hate to tell you that you'll be dealing with a bit more than 'not so much' here," Shay said with the hesitation of mock regret. "It's not so bad here in Toronto, but it'll snow. Sometimes we'll get a blizzard or two."

Delphine sighed. "I hope the drivers are used to it, at least."

Shay peered at her in careful study. "You never really said what led to your injury. Was it a car accident?"

"A car struck me, yes," Delphine said. "I was on a bicycle, however."

Surprise blossomed across Shay's face. "You were on a bike?"

Delphine arched an eyebrow at her. "What? Why is that surprising?"

"Sorry," Shay said quickly, shaking her head. "I just had trouble imagining you biking merrily through Toronto."

"Why?"

"I only ever see you—" Shay gestured at Delphine's person from head to toe. "—dressed in immaculate business attire."

"Yes, well, I also enjoy exercise and fresh air," Delphine defended herself, perhaps with more heat than she'd expected to feel or project. The wine was warm in her bloodstream.

Shay raised her hands, palms out, surrendering or placating. "Sure. Exercise and enjoy all the fresh air you want."

Delphine tipped her glass at Shay. "Maybe not on a bicycle anymore."

Shay frowned. "Has it made you hesitant to bike around?"

Delphine's face scrunched in thought. "Well. I'm not sure. I have not felt fully recovered and the weather has not been so nice to ride a bicycle."

Shay nodded. "It would be understandable if you didn't want to go out."

"Also, I probably need to take my bicycle to a shop."

"That, too," agreed Shay.

"Do you bicycle?" Delphine asked.

"Sure," Shay said. "At some point we only had two bikes, so me and my brothers would fight over who got to ride them."

"Your brothers?"
Shay nodded. "I have two."

"Older?"

"Yeah. I'm the 'baby.'" Shay made a face, but the rancor and exasperation was all posturing. "But we're all pretty close in age." Shay considered her. "Do you have any siblings?"

Delphine shook her head. "No."

Shay grinned, amused, as if at a private joke.

"I think I would have liked to have siblings," Delphine amended, then was unsure why she'd added that tidbit.

"It can be fun, but it can be rough, too," Shay supplied.

"But as the youngest and the only girl, you must have gotten a lot of attention?" Delphine hazarded.

Shay hummed. "I guess? Maybe? I was sort of a tomboy, so for a while it was probably like having three boys for my parents. And then the whole being gay thing didn't go over so well at first. With my mom, at least."

Delphine blinked. "You are gay." She meant to angle the words as a question seeking polite confirmation, but it sounded more like a leaded, weighted statement when it left her lips—and maybe a statement was what it should have been.

Shay spread her hands. "Guilty as charged."

Delphine shook her head slightly. "Sorry. I did not mean to sound like that. I would not have—I would not have guessed."

Shay's smile was hard at the corners, her eyes wary. "Are you... okay with that?"

"Of course," Delphine said with a lift of a shoulder. "I am a woman of science and science demonstrates that homosexuality occurs more and more often in nature than we've bothered to notice."

A little chuckle rolled out of Shay. "Is that what it's like to be a hard scientist?"

Delphine cocked her head. "Guided and reassured by proofs and facts?"

"What about the things we don't know yet?" asked Shay.

"Merely questions we don't yet have the answers to—but there are answers and explanations. We simply haven't found the modes of inquiry or," Delphine shook her head, "acquired the degree of technological advancements to investigate them. Yet."

"Wow," breathed Shay, incrementally leaning back in her chair.

"Isn't that obvious?" Delphine asked.

"Thinking like that—about what remains to be done and investigated and what we don't know for sure yet—isn't overwhelming?" Shay wondered.

Delphine shook her head. "I don't think so. I find it reassuring. What I may not know today, we may know tomorrow or five years from now. It's not a question of the infinite unknown, but a matter of
"It doesn't feel reductive?"

Delphine laughed. "The world is far too complex to be reduced so easily. Scientists, you know, are very cautious. It takes a very long period of trials for us to accept something as law and fact. We must discuss it for a long time and exhaust all the possibilities before we will say, 'This is a thing for certain.' The goal is to reduce the chances of being wrong."

Shay gave her a long, thorough scrutiny. "I wonder if it can be so simple and direct."

"Humans are not perfect," Delphine said flatly.

"No, we aren't," Shay agreed, raising her glass and draining the last of it. She set the glass down with a grimace. "And this particular one needs a cup of coffee. What do you say?"

Delphine found herself smiling. "I guess we'll be getting coffee after all."
Chapter 2

They met again, the following Friday. Not according to any formal arrangement, though in a way it aligned with the expectedness of such a step, what with nature, human nature, rushing to fill the vacuum of the cessation of their weekly sessions. There was a sense of habit about seeing Shay on a Friday, of falling into the threads of a pattern, that perhaps comforted a part of Delphine's nature, the scientist in her always seeking out the avenues of repetition, the laws by which the basest structures and instincts behaved.

Meeting like this wasn't exactly the same, of course, but change, too, was woven into the course of time, space, and evolution.

Strangers became acquaintances became friends.

Delphine didn't consider many people friends.

She probably wouldn't have called Shay that.

Even if she did begin to look forward to those nights after work when she drove out of the DYAD parking garage and coasted into a parking space across town, stepped out, and locked her car, leaving her laptop inside and her security badge in the glove compartment, how the air felt fresh on her face as she made the trek to the meeting location, how it felt to settle into a seat and wait with a glass of wine or a finger of whiskey on its way or, in the reverse scenario, to be greeted upon entering, to see, in either moment, the light of recognition in those bright eyes summon the familiar smile, the signal at last that the day, the week was over, that she had left behind Dr. Cormier and had become, for the moment, just Delphine.

*It shouldn't have felt that way. The two of them were different. In appearance. In outlook. They should have driven one another crazy, like the time Delphine, an ounce or two of pinot noir beyond the ability of politely checking her amusement, laughed and said, "No. There is no evidence that souls exist. The 'proofs' that people present are hearsay and pure, erm, fancy. I can find the papers and print them for you to read."

Shay retreated into silence. She wasn't, really, the argumentative type. There was a quiet reserve about her, a need, Delphine suspected, to try to be respectful.

Delphine didn't see why one had to be respectful of beliefs patently false.

"What are you thinking?" Delphine asked when Shay had stared too long into the layer of film that was the last sip of wine in her glass.

Shay glanced at her through her lashes. "That I know I can't argue with you about this."

Delphine waited, then said, "Because there's not much of an argument to make."

The muscles of Shay's face flinched in a grimace. "Sometimes you just . . . feel things."

"Honed survival instincts," Delphine said, "to run or fight. Compassion and empathy are adaptations to communal living. We say things come from the heart, but all of that is happening—" Delphine tapped her temple. "—up here."
Shay squinted at her. "I thought the French were supposed to be romantic."

Delphine laughed. "C'est vrai. But what would you know about the French, harboring such great love for Spain?"

"Again, if you go to Barcelona, you'd understand," Shay said, smiling.

"Or maybe you need to go to Paris," Delphine argued.

Shay's eyebrows fluttered up and down.

"What?" Delphine asked, squinting suspiciously at her companion.

Gripping the stem of her glass between her fingers, Shay turned her glass in circles and studied the play of light and shadow on the tabletop intently. "Maybe I have been to Paris."

Delphine hissed through her teeth. "See, now I know your opinion cannot be trusted."

Shay smiled at her glass. It faded a second later. Shay snuck a glance at Delphine out of the corner of her eye. "Haven't you ever been in love?"

Delphine brought her glass to her lips and hummed against it. "Evolutionary trick to promote reproduction and the propagation of a race."

Shay cocked her head. "You think animals fall in love?"

Delphine arched an eyebrow at her. "Do you?"

Shay's lips pressed together in consternation.

Delphine shrugged. "We have performed scans that show activity in the brains of animals that is similar to how we understand our emotions operate. So perhaps dogs are as affectionate of us as we are of them."

Shay sat up straighter. "Do you like dogs?"

Delphine laughed. "That's what you took away from that?"

"It's an important question," Shay insisted.

"I would not own a dog," Delphine said by way of answer. "Not any time soon."

"No?"

"Who has the time to walk a dog? Not me."

"Fair enough," Shay said.

"Do you have a dog?" Delphine wondered, reconsidering the enthusiasm with which Shay had asked the question.

Shay shook her head. "No. But we had one growing up. Some crazy mutt with too many bloodlines. He was a big dog—and the biggest scaredy cat. Imagine a hundred-pound dog trying to hide behind a group of scrawny kids."

"Is he still around?" Delphine asked delicately.
"No," Shay confirmed her suspicions. "He passed away years ago. He was a good dog."

Loyal, Delphine thought but did not say. Pack mentality.

Still, a part of her could not resist. "Do you think he had a soul?"

Shay looked wistful. "I don't know. I hope so. He deserved to have one far more than most of us."

Delphine regarded Shay. There was, sometimes, something sad about Shay Davydov. It shone through her eyes. At first Delphine suspected Shay harbored some degree of depression, but more and more she was beginning to wonder if the small woman perceived some sense of sorrow in the surrounding world that pressed upon her, bending and refracting through her small frame and emerging through the soft, glassy blues of her eyes in a way that almost made Delphine want to believe that maybe Shay Davydov did feel things that pointed to depths otherworldly and unknowable.

"You didn't answer my original question," Shay pointed out, penetrating Delphine's thoughts.

Delphine replied only with a smile.
Delphine and Shay shared standard meals less often than they simply enjoyed meeting at happy hour for drinks and snacks. It was easier, more casual, somehow less of an obligation and yet more likely to prolong the length of their rendezvous. Perhaps it was because a bar was less likely to mind a pair of friends chatting and drinking away the hours, but a restaurant on a Friday night was always in demand of its tables.

Dinners happened on occasion, in particular after long busy days when either of them might have skipped or skimmed on lunch, or simply days so busy that the prospect of being subjected to the din of a bar was exhausting. On days like these, Delphine secretly wished she could have retreated into Shay's office, lain down upon the table, and let Shay's hands smooth and erase away the day's trials and tedium.

Delphine never asked her to. Though she was tempted.

Proper meals tended to be more subdued affairs. Shay was amenable to any restaurant suggestion, claiming she could find something to eat anywhere, and for the most part she did, content to poke at monstrous salads and tear into bread—or what passed for bread in Toronto—if nothing else was available. Delphine found herself becoming more mindful of choosing restaurants, taking the time to peruse online menus, and, for a moment, weighing her own choices.

"Does it bother you when I order meat?" Delphine asked over an open menu once.

Shay didn't glance up. "No. That's your choice."

Delphine lay her hand upon the menu and mulled over the matter-of-fact, straightforward, unperturbed response. "Okay. Now I'm curious."

"About what?" Shay asked, still engaged with the appetizer options.

"The reason you don't eat meat. Is it ethical? Spiritual?"

Shay, hearing her, smiled but didn't reply at first. After a moment, she snuck a glance at Delphine. "What do you mean?"

"What do I mean?" Delphine echoed quizzically. "I'm asking after the reasons you don't eat meat."

"Yes, but you said ethical or spiritual reasons, and I'm wondering what you think those reasons would be," Shay clarified.

Delphine considered demurring and pressing Shay to answer, but settled back in her chair and regarded Shay gamely. "Ethical reasons being the mistreatment of livestock. That they are raised and kept in poor living conditions, artificially fattened and given questionable or inappropriate feed."

Delphine cocked her head, considering. "Perhaps those are more practical concerns than ethical."

"What do I mean?" Delphine echoed quizzically. "I'm asking after the reasons you don't eat meat."

"Yes, but you said ethical or spiritual reasons, and I'm wondering what you think those reasons would be," Shay clarified.

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The smile on Shay's face stretched and stretched as Delphine continued. "And the spiritual reasons?"

"Well." Delphine gathered her thoughts. "You are not Christian," she hazarded and Shay nodded in confirmation, still smiling, "so you're not following Biblical restrictions. However, you are . . ."

Delphine hesitated. Shay raised an eyebrow. Delphine cycled through the options and chose what seemed the least objectionable. "Zen."
Shay laughed and Delphine bottled her own laughter, encouraged by Shay's reaction. When she calmed down, Shay said, "Okay. What does that mean? In the scheme of not eating meat, I mean."

"I don't know?" Delphine admitted, gesturing helplessly. "Maybe that we are all connected and thus we should not eat other living things, in case we might be eating a parent or a sibling or a lover from a previous life?"

To this Shay simply sat smiling at Delphine, withholding comment, until she simply shook her head.

"No?" Delphine asked.

"No, no," Shay said quickly. "That was—that was pretty good. Those are good reasons. I'm just . . . impressed by how much you know."

"My knowledge of these topics is . . . rudimentary, at best," Delphine said.

"She says, using excellent English vocabulary," Shay deadpanned.

Delphine shrugged off the compliment for the unnecessary commentary it was. "So is the reason you don't eat meat one of those reasons or something along those lines?"

Shay ducked back into the refuge of the menu. "No."

Delphine waited but Shay didn't elaborate. "That's it? Just no?" Shay nodded. Delphine's mouth thinned in consternation. "Is it that you don't care for the taste or the texture? Why eat fish, but not poultry, swine, or beef?"

Shay flipped to the back of the menu, flipped back to the front. "It's personal."

An edge lined her voice that Delphine had not heard before. Shay, she'd learned, had a light dancing sense of humor and, maybe a bit to Delphine's fascination, a degree of self-assurance and confidence that weathered Delphine's bouts of skepticism and studied remarks. Shay actually seemed to find Delphine's efforts to poke holes in her casual, relaxed spiritual mien amusing, which could be simultaneously frustrating, like assaulting a wall, and goading, as if a dare to try again. Entreaties that Delphine stop were always accompanied by giggles or smiles, that in no way acted as deterrent to curb Delphine's audacity and almost certainly were guarantees that further discussion would dip into the ridiculous.

So this was different.

Delphine's curiosity urged her to push, but tact held her back. She watched Shay, who appeared engrossed in parsing seafood entrée descriptions had it not been for the fact that her gaze remained fixated on the same spot for nearly half a minute.

"I was in the military," Shay said abruptly. "The army, actually. Got deployed for a time to the Middle East." She shook her head. "It was supposed to be some quiet little outpost. It was, for the most part. Boring, even." She fell quiet, breaths even but heavier. "One day there was an incident, with an IED—like a landmine. I saw it take a man's leg off. I tried to help him, to stop the bleeding." There was the smallest shake of her head. "There was just this . . . ragged mess where his leg ended. And he—" She stopped, licked her lips. "After that, I—meat reminds me of . . . that. For a while even the smell of it brought me back to that moment. So I stopped eating it." She glanced at Delphine, exhaling heavily through her nose. "That probably sounds silly to you. You've probably seen a lot of things being a doctor."

Delphine was quiet, processing the deluge of information Shay had just divulged. She breathed
deeply, released it in a soundless sigh. "It doesn't sound silly."

Shay shrugged. "Fish doesn't trigger the same association. I don't know why. Maybe because my
dad and my brother love to fish and they'd always bring back their catch. We'd descale and fillet
them ourselves." She smiled, the lines of her mouth hard. "So I eat fish. It's more like a happy
coincidence that not eating meat seems to align with everything else, but truthfully my body just
doesn't crave it anymore."

Delphine nodded. "I'm sorry," she said softly.

Shay shook her head. "What's there to be sorry about?"

"I mean that I didn't mean to pry," Delphine said. "I just thought—"

"That seeing how I'm 'zen' that I'd be a crusader about not eating meat," Shay finished when
reluctance stopped Delphine short. "I get it."

Delphine nodded, lips pressed together. Her eyes narrowed. "You must have been very young."

Shay laughed. "You're one to talk. You're not much older than I am. You're not even thirty yet and
you've got a PhD and an MD."

Delphine shook her head. "That's—that's different."

"How?" Shay demanded. "You must have been 'very young' when people were trusting you to
handle sharp and pointy things around them."

"Only under the guidance and observation of someone more experienced," Delphine insisted.

Shay smiled and only shook her head, signalling her own skepticism. The response, to Delphine's
mild surprise, wedged and lodged beneath her skin like a splinter. Was that how she made Shay feel
on occasion?

Their waiter appeared at that moment and the diversion of placing their orders eased the tension.
When he departed, Shay crossed her arms, placed her forearms upon the table, leaned forward, and
asked, "Did performing surgeries or autopsies ever gross you out?"

"No," Delphine said immediately and without guile. "I found it fascinating. Understanding how
something works, like the body, makes it less mysterious and frightening." She studied Shay from a
different angle. "But you deal daily with the aftermath of injuries. Doesn't that bother you?"

Shay shook her head. "It's different. They're healing and I'm helping them. They get better." Her
hand flapped about in a conciliatory wave. "A lot of them get better. They're survivors. They have
scars and pain but . . . they're still alive. Doing their best to live, trying to improve—and sometimes I
can help them with that." Shay smiled at her. "They come to me after you guys are done with them."

"Not me," Delphine cautioned. "I'm not a practicing medical doctor. Not exactly." She passed her
fingertips over her lips. "I think I understand what you mean." She smiled. "I improved with your
help."

Shay answered with warmth that softened her gaze. "I was happy to help."

Delphine gazed back at Shay and saw what she hadn't seen before: a fellow healer. Not a medical
doctor, but analogous, whose concerns and methods operated in a different but no less qualitative
realm of human health. Delphine couldn't have said why she hadn't recognized it before. Perhaps it
was because she'd glimpsed something else entirely in the crack Shay had opened up into her history. Something broken, something fractured. A scar. A legacy. Something that Delphine suspected drove Shay to try to repair others.

And wasn't that what Delphine as a medical scientist attempted to do every day in a laboratory?

Discover viable means to fix humanity.

But looking at Shay, thinking about the stiffness in her shoulder and hip that greeted her first thing in the morning, pondering the whimsy of Neolutionism's wildest dreams, Delphine began to wonder: Afterwards, then what? When humans became what they could be, what would they be?

Delphine almost asked Shay. It sounded silly, though, and intuition told her Shay would put the question elsewhere. Instead, Delphine steered away from ordering meat and took to patiently explaining why bread in the Americas simply was not worthy of bearing that name.
Chapter 4

Shay wouldn't have said she had a type but if she had had a type, Delphine Cormier wouldn't have exactly fit the bill. There was the obvious, glaring complication, namely that signs indicated Delphine was way closer to a 0 than even a 3 on the Kinsey scale. Then there was the slightly more problematic, slightly more worrisome streak of skepticism that threaded through their conversations whenever they veered into the metaphysical. It was never outright hostile, but at times maybe no more than a half-step removed, when Shay could see Delphine fall just shy of open dismissiveness. Which, coming from any other party, would have edged into repellent.

But the inconvenient thing about having a crush was that through it filtered the object's every word, expression, and appearance and to these were lent a heightened brightness to every trait already appealing and a soft sheen to anything that in normal circumstances would have been considered objectionable.

There were also the simple facts that Delphine was possessed of bright eyes speckled with subtle gradients, a throaty laugh and a charming accent, a sly smile, a head of curls that tempted touch, and legs that went on for lengths unfair for comparison but just right for admiration.

It was borderline offensive that Delphine Cormier was so damn gorgeous.


A friend, probably seeing a dopiness in Shay's expression when she'd happened to mention Delphine, simply advised, "No, Shay. Stop. Don't do that to yourself."

Crushes, though, didn't work that way. There wasn't a switch in her heart—or, if she followed Delphine's assertion, in her mind—that Shay could voluntarily flick. It was a matter of distance or time or time and distance.

Shay wasn't a big fan of distance. The reassurance and comfort of contact had been a big draw of her current career, not just for her clients, but for herself, in the way it constantly connected her to other people, their health, their recovery, their progress.

Yet a part of Shay had hoped spending more time with Delphine would scour away the rosiness her perception had settled upon the other woman, for one-hour snatches of a person in a vulnerable state often didn't translate to the persona that navigated the larger social and professional worlds, but meeting with Delphine had uncovered shades of warmth Shay hadn't expected. She'd assumed she'd find emotional and intellectual disconnection or runaway ambition in the scientist-by-way-of-medicine, but Shay caught glimpses of a flame of compassion in Delphine. She'd seen it when Delphine had apologized about inquiring into her choice to practice a pescetarian diet. She saw something like it—something tinged with apprehension—whenever the topic strayed close to discussion of Delphine's work.

Whatever Delphine was working on, it wasn't, Shay intimated, just for money or glory.

There was maybe even something dangerous about it, something that shed its air of intrigue onto Delphine herself.

Delphine posed just a bit of a mystery.
One just out of reach, one that Shay wasn't sure how to approach or if it was an enigma that could be approached. Maddeningly, Shay wasn't even sure what about Delphine had captured her attention in the first place.

It was a question Shay tried not to pursue too hard.

Unfortunately, to someone like Shay, that just made the whole picture far more alluring.

Maybe it wasn't her greatest trait at all times, but Shay had a need to know things about people. And there seemed something worth knowing about Delphine Cormier.

But Shay refrained from inquiring.

It was, in its way, a self-defense mechanism, just as spending time with Delphine was supposed to unveil a personality too diametrically opposed to Shay's for them to be companionable, much less compatible, and demonstrate that any casual period of time they passed together would be brittle and strained, not asking questions meant Shay couldn't get to know Delphine too well, couldn't fall into the trap of inciting and investing her curiosity.

That didn't mean that Delphine couldn't volunteer information. And opinions. And lectures. And generally fill in the broad strokes that had comprised Shay's impression of her with color and shading and hints of shadows.

It didn't stop Delphine asking questions of her.

Another pesky thing about a crush was how it repetitively bent reality through a series of refractions and reflections that circled around and compounded atop one another, where beneath the surface of constant doubt—Delphine only wanted to get to know Shay in the way that acquaintances were curious to learn about burgeoning friends—there lurked and reared a ray of senseless hope: Maybe there was more than just innocent platonic curiosity in Delphine's interest.

Dangerous thoughts. Exhausting, if she let them run through their endless iterations. Futile, because —

Well. Straight girl.

Shay thought about this whenever she fired up the Sapphire app on her phone and gave the faces that cycled through a cursory scan. She thought about how she had a whole network of queer women at her fingertip—swipe left, swipe right—and she was stuck on the straight woman who liked to grab drinks on Friday because —

Not because of Shay, specifically.

"Hey."

Shay nearly fell out of her chair at the intrusion of a voice so close to her ear. Twisting around, she found Delphine standing by her chair, smiling in a way that struggled between apologetic uncertainty and wholesale amusement.

"Jeez, Delphine," Shay uttered on a thin exhalation.

"Hey. I thought it was you," Delphine said, smile easing into cheery pleasure. "I wasn't sure because this cafe is a bit far from your office. Are you not working today?"

Shay took a few steadying breaths, easing her galloping heart into a steadier trot of a pulse. "My
"I have a few minutes," Delphine said. "I don't have to be back at any specific time."

"Yeah? Do you want to join me?" Shay invited, indicating the empty chair at the table.

"Sure," Delphine accepted, sliding into the space across from Shay. She set the coffee cup down on the table, fingertips maintaining tenuous contact and slowly turning the cup in circles in its spot. "Did I interrupt anything? You looked really . . ."


"A game?" Delphine asked.

"No," Shay said evenly, "not a game." She hesitated, considered, then asked, "Do you know what Tinder is?"

"Tinder?" Delphine repeated in a tone of cluelessness. "It sounds familiar."

"I'm . . . actually not surprised at all that you have no idea," declared Shay drily.

"Why?" Delphine asked, sounding unsure if she should be offended or defensive or alarmed. "What is it?"

"A dating app, more or less," Shay explained.

"Oh," Delphine said. "You were using it?"

"No, I was using Sapphire, which is like a lesbian version of Tinder." Shay unlocked her phone and flipped it to show Delphine. "See, you swipe right if you like a person, left if you don't."

"And this . . . helps you find dates?" Delphine asked, squinting at the photograph on the screen. The subject was smiling, which earned Shay's approval.

"It can," Shay said. "It helps you meet people." She reclaimed her phone and set it aside. "When I first started using it, I figured it was a way to meet people—well, gay women—in the city."

Delphine nodded slowly. "Did it work?"

"I met women," Shay said neutrally, "yeah."

"And have you gone on dates with women you met using this . . . ?"

"Sapphire," Shay provided. She nodded. "Yeah. A few."

Delphine studied her. "No success?"
"Not yet," Shay admitted. Her shoulders lifted in a small shrug. "Maybe it's me."

Delphine's eyebrows pinched. "What do you mean?"

Shay waved a hand. "Obviously something's not working. It might be me. Although sometimes it's because people fluff up their profiles and you only find out when you meet them."

"People do that?" wondered Delphine.

"Yeah," Shay affirmed, matter-of-factly. She avoided Delphine's eyes. "I did. A little bit."

"Really? Why?" It was a little gratifying that Delphine sounded and looked genuinely confused. Shay shrugged. "Because just saying I'm an RMT doesn't sound that exciting?"

Delphine sat quietly, looking on the verge of a frown but settling on the side of a thoughtfully closed expression. "I see. But doesn't that upset people when they find out?"

Shay smiled half-heartedly. "It usually doesn't get that far."

"Okay," conceded Delphine, "but you didn't explain how you are the issue."

Shay slid her phone between her hands and, fixing her attention on it, pivoted it this way and that. "Maybe I have bad judgment. Or bad taste. Or bad intuition."

"Do you not get along with the women you meet?"

"For the most part, I do. If I don't, it's usually because a woman was completely not what I expected."

"What's lacking, then?" Delphine asked.

"Chemistry?" Shay suggested. "A spark?"

Delphine laughed, a low, short sound originating deep in her throat. "Maybe the problem is the expectation of romance."

"You are really not romantic, are you?" Shay grumbled. "Tell me you're not dating."

Delphine laughed again, but there was a thin, thready harmonic that hummed beneath the effort. "I'm not, but that is beside the point and has no correlation. What I mean is that you go into these meetings with the purpose and understanding that you are looking for romance. In that way, you are so focused on that one thing that you are blinded to the possibilities. You want something big and flashy when it might be small and subtle."

"What about trusting your gut instincts?" Shay retorted.

Delphine leaned forward on her forearms and caught Shay's gaze. "Your relationships in the past—were they predicated on 'gut instincts'?"

The number of discernible shades in Delphine's eyes distracted Shay for a moment almost awkwardly long. "Some of them."

"Yet here you are," Delphine said in a low voice, not unkindly but not comfortably, "single."

"Harsh," Shay breathed.
"Sorry," Delphine offered, not sorry at all. She leaned back. "Are you so eager to fall in love?"

Shay regarded Delphine’s lovely face. "Maybe I’m not eager to be lonely."

"Are you lonely?" Delphine asked with a softness that Shay thought was almost tender. "You have friends. Like me."

Shay chuckled, hearing but consciously not noting Delphine’s qualification. "That's not the same."

"Why? Because there is no sex?" Delphine’s clipped accent lent a hard quality to the last word.

"No," protested Shay, startled, but she quickly amended, "Well, maybe that's a part of it, yeah, but no, it's not just because of the sex."

"Then what? It can't be trust," Delphine insisted. "You trust your friends. I think many people trust their friends more than they trust their lovers. You can probably find a study saying so."

Shay grinned. "Do you only believe something if there's a study to back it up?"

"No, but it's nice to have corroborating evidence to prove you're right. How is 'romance' different but for . . . desire?"

"I don't know," Shay admitted. "Maybe it's—" Her breath caught. "—risk. You put so much of yourself into someone—all these hopes and feelings, like trust, and love—and you have to put faith in another person to value those things and cherish them and—and entrust the same to you."

Delphine perched her chin upon a hand. "What you described sounds like expectations to me. Expectations that are unclear and very difficult to meet."

Shay narrowed her eyes at Delphine. "Could you be any less romantic?"

"I think 'realistic' is more accurate," Delphine countered.

Shay shook her head. "I can't wait for the day I see you in love."

Delphine laughed. "The way you say it makes it sound like a punishment."

"It should be," Shay muttered. "But the aggravating thing is that love finds people like you when you're not even trying. Whereas people like me—" Shay snatched up her phone and wiggled it in the air. "—have no luck."

"You're trying too hard," Delphine said, tone approaching gentle.

Shay met Delphine's eyes squarely. "Or not hard enough."

Delphine didn't blink. Or contradict. Or scold.

Shay smiled, feeling silly and hopeless and all around like a fool. "You should get back to work."

"And leave you to that?" Delphine asked, indicating Shay's phone with a nudge of her chin.

Shay clutched the phone to her chest in a show of mock protective indignation. "Don't judge."

Delphine stood up and gathered her possessions, including her untouched coffee. "I'd like to, but somehow you make it hard." She flashed a smile that projected she was teasing. "Good luck." She bent down and pressed a kiss to Shay's cheek, then, as Shay held herself still to repress flinching
back, bestowed another on Shay's other cheek. "Ciao."

"Is that going to be a thing now?" Shay asked to cover a second's daze.

Delphine's laughter rippled in delight. "It is a French thing." She waggled her fingers at Shay. "Later."

Shay shook her head in light admonishment and gave her a shooing motion. "Bye."

Straight girls.

One straight French girl in particular.

Shay knew better. She only wished her heart—or her body—or the rest of her brain—knew better as well.
"No," Delphine intoned absently as she dragged the tip of her finger across the small screen's width from right edge to left. "No, no—"

"Whoa, whoa, wait," Shay exclaimed, lashing out in a panic to arrest Delphine's whirlwind progress by capturing the relentless woman's hand between her clutching fingers. In her haste Shay overbalanced, tipping halfway off her stool and nearly keeling into Delphine. Her free hand darted out to brace herself, finding counterbalance upon Delphine's thigh.

The Frenchwoman's alarm and confusion throughout the display of the unexpected acrobatics quickly abated into amusement when Shay didn't tumble or take Delphine with her.

"You okay?" Delphine inquired drily.

Shay laughed, surprised by her own clumsiness. "I'm fine. Sorry."

Delphine graced her with dubious concern. "Does this one excite you so much? She doesn't look that special."

Releasing Delphine and resettling on her stool, Shay picked up her phone, which they'd laid on the bartop between them, and peered closer at the profile picture of the candidate she had spared from Delphine's judgment. "I like her smile."

"Really? That's probably the only thing remarkable about her," declared Delphine.

Shay regarded Delphine consideringly. "How do you know? You've been going through these so fast, have you even read the profiles?"

"Of course." Delphine pointed to the phone. "This one lists her occupation as 'artist,' but adds dog walker on the side. Putting it all together, I'd say she's not a very profitable artist."

Shay laughed. "Maybe she likes dogs a lot and dog walking is a business practical way to be around them." Shay propped her forearms upon the counter. "Even if what you said were true, I'm, what—"

She flicked a hand lazily through the air. "—too good for that?"

"Yes," Delphine said without hesitation, brow crinkling with consternation. "As your friend, I expect better for you. I want better for you."

Shay snorted and didn't bother to fight off an incredulous grin. "Thank you?"

"Besides," Delphine continued, shifting in her seat and ignoring the sarcasm in Shay's tone, "she wrote that she is a 'foodie.'"

"So? I like food," Shay said defensively.

"Yes," Delphine agreed, waving a hand nonchalantly, "but she doesn't indicate that she follows any dietary restrictions, so she probably eats meat."

"You eat meat," Shay reasoned.

Delphine flinched back, looking decidedly unimpressed that Shay should draw the comparison. "One, I don't consider myself a 'foodie'—"
"Just a bread snob."

"Two," Delphine continued, holding up two fingers, allowing the state of bread quality to pass without criticism for the sake of the greater matter at hand, "you and I are not dating, so your diet doesn't affect mine on a routine basis."

Shay leaned toward Delphine suspiciously. "Are you saying it's annoying to date a vegetarian?"

Delphine lifted her shoulders. "It could be if you really love food and eating a variety of foods. Restricted diets are . . . restrictive."

Shay's eyes narrowed. "Are you trying to tell me something?"

"Yes," Delphine said seriously, "that you and a foodie are not a match."

Shay's smile returned for a second, but softened into something more placating and gentling the next. "Well, maybe she wouldn't feel that way. It's something you find out by asking. That's the point of messaging one another and chatting and meeting up. You get to clarify these things and feel each other out."

Delphine's brow furrowed. "But I thought the point of using this app was to filter out improbable candidates quickly and efficiently."

Shay's eyebrows shot up and she stretched back, mouth tight. "You certainly have 'quick and efficient' down pat."

"Just because I read quickly—"

"Seriously."

"—doesn't mean I'm not dedicating the same degree of attention to each profile that you would. Besides," added Delphine, getting comfortable, "studies show that first impressions and snap judgments are formed very, very quickly."

"Uh huh," Shay said, propping her chin in hand. "What was your first impression of me?"

Delphine didn't let herself hesitate. "Is this hippie really capable of helping me?"

Shay laughed, startled by Delphine's frank honesty. "Yeah? But I proved you wrong, didn't I?"

"I didn't say first impressions were final impressions. My point was that you would be moving just as quickly as I am through the list."

"Yeah, well, hearing your criteria, I'm not sure I trust that your judgment aligns with what I'm looking for," declared Shay, but in a tone just this side of teasing.

"But according to you, your judgment hasn't proven reliable, either." Delphine grinned. "Like a good scientist, you are applying new methodology to test your hypothesis."

"I think," drawled Shay, "that you're enjoying this too much and that we should sign you up for Tinder."

"What? No!" Delphine burst out, laughing, "Why would you repay my kindness and help with a perverse form of punishment?"

"You're not even a little curious?" Shay wondered.
"No," Delphine said, definitively.

"Okay," Shay said lowly, "what about sex?"

"What about sex?" Delphine lobbed back casually.

Shay tilted her head. "Don't you ever feel, you know, frustrated?"

"I don't have that problem," Delphine said, curt.

Shay drew breath to inquire further, but stopped, giving Delphine another pass of consideration. Delphine met her study coolly, unbudging, revealing nothing. When Shay didn't fill the silence, Delphine tapped Shay's phone with an insistent finger.

"What did you like about her smile?" Delphine asked.

"It's happy."

"Happy?" echoed Delphine, almost on top of Shay's explanation.

"Maybe a better word is 'expressive,'" Shay reconsidered. She unlocked her screen and put the picture between them again. "Her eyes are bright, like when she smiles her smile reaches her eyes. It's a good picture."

Delphine shoved back the curly mass of her hair and rested her head in her hand, gazing at Shay from a sideways vantage. "That's all it takes?"

Shay spread her hands. "It's a good place to start."

"I thought you were being too difficult, but maybe you're being too easy," Delphine admonished.

"What, like you've never seen a smile that just made you feel . . . welcomed and at ease? Warm?"

Delphine merely looked at Shay for a beat longer than comfortable. "Not immediately."

Shay nodded, reaching for her glass. "You don't trust easily."

"Maybe," Delphine afforded, shrugging. Something in her shoulder twinged in protest, eliciting a wince.

Shay frowned. "Your shoulder?"

"Mm," Delphine hummed, moving gingerly to flex the muscles. "It's a little stiff."

"Have you been stretching every day?" Shay asked, sliding off the stool to her feet.

Delphine, eyes closed, rotated her arm in small circles. "Most days."

"That's not every day," Shay said as she slipped behind Delphine and placed her hands upon Delphine's shoulders.

"What are you doing?" Delphine asked in alarm, turning her head to focus all her confusion in Shay's direction.

"Relax," Shay urged her. "I'm going to work out those knots and kinks."

"Right here?" Delphine asked, voice tightened.
"Mmhmm," Shay said, fingers digging into Delphine's tender flesh. After a second, Shay asked, "Would you please relax?"

"People are looking," Delphine pointed out.

"Who cares?" Shay countered. "I usually charge for this, you know."

Delphine bit back a groan of satisfaction. "Yes, I—" She inhaled sharply as Shay's discerning fingers encountered a knot. "I know. Well, my insurance knows."

"Mmhmm," Shay agreed. "You could always come back, you know. You've got some serious tightness going on."

Delphine, submitting to the pleasure-pain of Shay's ministrations by hanging her head to the side to allow Shay greater access, swallowed a gasp. "It wouldn't be—ah—awkward?"

Shay laughed, twisting to get some leverage. "No. We'd have more to talk about now."

"Ah, who wants to talk?" Delphine wheezed.

Shay smiled. "Okay, come and don't talk and let me work."

Delphine surrendered wordlessly. Shay probed and kneaded at her shoulder for probably no more than five minutes. Giving her shoulder a gentle cooling rubdown, Shay drifted away and back into her seat. The absence of her touch bit into Delphine keenly. She made a pathetic sound in her throat that made Shay laugh.

"It would feel better if you stretched everyday," Shay told her. "You should really look into yoga classes."

Delphine hummed in complaint as she did a few more arm circles. "Who has the time?"

"I'm sure you have time waiting for your mysterious lab results to do a few toe touches and shoulder stretches."

"I'm sure I'll look very professional stretching in the lab," Delphine remarked drily.

"I didn't realize you were so self-conscious," Shay teased.

"Do you know how many women are in the hard sciences?" Delphine said.

Shay leaned upon the bar. "No."

"Not enough," Delphine said.

"Does that go for this bar right now, too?" Shay asked. "Is that why you were so self-conscious?"

Delphine peeked at her archly. "I should think there are not enough women here for you."

"Ha ha," Shay said flatly. "I'm not a lech."

Delphine smiled. "Perhaps another one of your problems."

Shay laughed. "You have no idea how many women would hit on you at a lesbian bar."

"That sounds amazing," Delphine lifted her eyebrows suggestively. "Maybe we should find out."
"Oh my God," Shay gasped. "Really?"

"I can be your, um, what do they call that person who approaches people on behalf of a friend?"

"Wingman?"

"Yes. Wingman. I can be your wingman."

"Are you kidding me? You would seriously be too busy fending off women interested in a new face to be my wingman."

"I'll redirect them," Delphine assured her.

Shay shook her head, laughter on her face. "You're hilarious."

"Why not?" Delphine insisted, spurred by Shay's resistance. Her eyes sparkled. "You've made me curious."

"What, you're saying I should take you to a lesbian bar for science?"

Delphine gestured aimlessly. "Sure. If that's how you want to qualify it." She leaned in closer and dropped the volume of her voice. "It can't be more obnoxious than when we regularly meet."

Shay shook her head, smiling faintly. "It's just . . . different."

Delphine peered at her closely, their proximity heightening the impression of her scrutiny's intensity. "Now who is self-conscious?"

"Would you please stop?" Shay said, leaning away.

Delphine smiled. "Think about it. I think I would make a good wingman."

"In that case, step one would be to stop looking so gorgeous, so that you don't draw all the attention," Shay said.

"I can dress down," Delphine insisted.

"That's not the problem," Shay droned.

Delphine laughed. Shay shoved her phone at her.

"You can continue to be my Sapphire wingman."

"Does that mean you'll stop complaining?" Delphine asked, shaking the phone.

"I reserve the right to offer constructive criticism," Shay said.

"So no," Delphine said, holding the screen out to Shay for her to unlock.

"If you eliminate everyone, then there are no possibilities," Shay pointed out.

"Were there many to begin with?" Delphine asked.

Shay made a face. "That was low, Delphine."

Delphine studied her out of the corner of her eye. "When was the last time you went on a date?"
"Not getting into this right now," Shay said.

"What do you mean?" Delphine asked.

"I'm sensing way too much judgment coming from your direction to have a nice conversation about that right now."

"Okay," Delphine agreed gamely. "I'll ask you another time." She studied the photograph of the woman who had brought about the original interruption in her wingmaning. At last, she said, "Her smile itself isn't that nice, you know."

Shay rolled her eyes. "It's what's behind her smile. Try looking a little deeper."

Delphine suppressed her own smile. It was almost too much fun teasing Shay Davydov. Fun enough to play into Shay's expectations. Certainly fun enough to play at being wingman. Maybe even worthwhile enough to actually be her wingman.

The thought nearly broke Delphine's composure. To distract herself, she swiped left.
Drinks tonight? Delphine inquired of Shay by SMS late one innocuous Friday afternoon, like any number of Fridays preceding it, though perhaps busier or calmer than some, but unremarkable on the whole.

Can I take a rain check?, Shay messaged back. Delphine puzzled at the idiom, fingers typing out a query, when another message from Shay arrived: I have plans tonight, but another time?

Deleting her half-formed question, Delphine replied with a confirmation and reassurance: Sure.

She googled the idiom, smiled with amusement at the definition, filed away the new linguistic knowledge, and thought little more of the exchange, moving onto pondering what she might like to have for dinner, if a trip to restock groceries was the better option, maybe a stop at a bookstore to browse the medical nonfiction or a shoe store to pick up a new pair of boots. Shay's phrasing was out of the ordinary, but not her unavailability. They'd both been busy at some time or another, having to beg off—another phrase Shay had dropped once—last-minute proposals to meet up. While Fridays had become the usual day on which they met, neither had a monopoly in the other's calendar to occupy any of its free hours.

That was how it had been, that was how it would be, that was how Delphine understood, treated, and appreciated Shay's company. Shay was there when she was there, Shay wasn't there when she wasn't there. When they spent time together, Delphine enjoyed it: time passed quickly in Shay's presence, there was conversation, there was laughter, there was ease. When other obligations intruded, there was maybe a second's disappointment, but there would always be another time, another Friday, another rendezvous.

Their acquaintance was reliable in its way, even as it was undemanding.

It was comfortable.

They'd made patterns, they followed rhythms, they had settling routines, demarcated trails through their interactions, like the paths Shay's hands had taken across her muscles in their practiced, searching route. Only now it was words and lines of inquiry.

Which was why when they saw each other the following week, Delphine asked, as she would have any other time, "Did you have fun last week? Or was it business?"

Because that was what they did now. They filled in the blanks of the missing hours. Even if the answer was often a simple dismissal, an "Oh, just work."

But Shay deviated from the script. She hesitated. Her eyes fixed on a point for a reluctant second.

"It wasn't," Shay replied slowly, "business."

Delphine studied Shay, the disinclination in her tone and mannerism, the measured way she spoke aloud, not quite directly at Delphine. "And . . . it wasn't fun?"

Shay avoided her eyes and mumbled something so lowly that Delphine didn't catch it.

"Excuse me?" Delphine asked, leaning close to hear better.

"It was a date," Shay said quickly, clearly. She added, almost in a sigh, "I had a date."
Shay's bright eyes sought Delphine's, skittered away, a soft pink rising in her cheeks. Her body language and weary timbre, rather than her words themselves, tripped Delphine into an unbalanced sense of surprise and unease. That Shay appeared nervous, that the declaration sounded like an admission rather than an interesting tidbit to share and dissect, that it was, actually, now that Delphine quickly cast her mind back, perhaps the most personal, presently occurring aspect of her life that Shay had volunteered to her. Delphine knew about Sapphire, that Shay used it, even the type of woman Shay gravitated toward, that Shay had met some of these women, that presumably she dated, certainly had dated, but Delphine had never known of it happening contemporaneously, had never known if and how and how often Shay engaged anyone through the app or through other avenues.

It was like Delphine knew Shay had brothers, but not whether she maintained regular contact with both or either, that she was settling, settled, in Toronto and that occasionally she met with Delphine, usually on a Friday, but not what other social circles she mingled in, that Shay held a bevy of spiritual beliefs, but not if she studied or visited temples or if she belonged to a community or a sect.

Delphine thought again of their casual, carefree, sans obligation connection, the ease with which it let their lives touch for brief moments, never delving beyond the tangential contact, and plucked at a corner of the napkin resting beneath her glass.

She was seeing Shay vulnerable.

She hadn't before.

She realized that now.

"It didn't," Delphine asked softly, "go well?"

Shay sighed and the awkwardness rolled off and out of her. Her shoulders rose and fell in a sad shrug, a smile emerging in the wake. As if Delphine had given her permission to speak, Shay said, "It wasn't . . . awful. She was nice. Cute. We just . . ." Shay shook her head, "didn't have anything to talk about."

Delphine's eyebrows lifted. "Really?"

With no more than a look, Shay demanded an explanation.

Delphine gestured aimlessly. "You and I are very different, but we . . . find ways to talk. You find ways to talk."

Shay simply looked at Delphine for a time. Then she smiled. Delphine hazarded it looked fond. "Not me, Delphine. You." Shay let her clarification linger, without qualification, for a breath, then added, "I guess I should have known how it would turn out. Our messages to each other were fine, but mostly just . . . polite. Not . . ." Shay shrugged again. ". . . exciting."

Delphine, mind half-dedicated to processing Shay's earlier assertion, asked, "Then why did you meet with her?"

"Because why not?" Shay offered feebly. "She seemed nice? She was cute?" The last thought pulled Shay up short. "She was really cute. Tall. Dressed really well." Shay made a face. "I sound desperate, don't I?"

Delphine redirected her attention to the ongoing conversation, brow scrunching. "For what?" Shay's expression went blank, prompting Delphine to ask, "Sex?"
Shay sighed heavily and slumped a bit. Delphine had the impression that at another time she might have actually draped herself across the bar top.

Delphine cocked her head. "Is it sex you're seeking?"

Tints of pink resurfaced in Shay's countenance. "Well, that's part of it, yeah."

"Part of it," Delphine repeated slowly. "But if sex is the object, or the most pressing one, can't you—how do you put it in English?"

"You mean look for something with no strings attached?" Shay supplied.

Delphine nodded. "Yes."

"Find a hookup," Shay continued.

Delphine flipped her hand palm up in concurrence. "Yes."

"Have a fling," Shay tagged on, a smile growing on her lips.

"Just so," Delphine agreed. "Is that not something you can do?"

"It's an option," Shay acceded.

"Not for you?" Delphine prodded.


Delphine nodded. "So you won't have sex with someone unless you feel 'connected'?"

"I didn't say that."

"So you will have sex with someone in cases where there's no 'connection'?”

Shay shook her head, smiling to herself in a way that radiated Here we go again. She simply said, "It's not as satisfying. For me."

"But you can," Delphine pointed out.

"But it's not as satisfying," Shay reiterated. Her lips thinned into a line of consternation. "It's like . . . when you scratch an itch and it goes away for a second, but then it comes back, even worse."

Delphine bobbed her head to the side. "I know the feeling."

Shay appraised her with restrained amusement. "But not when it comes to sex."

Delphine shook her head.

"Do you—" Shay began and abruptly stopped.

"What?" Delphine asked when Shay didn't continue.

But it was gone, whatever the question was. Delphine saw the thought retreating fast and far into the recesses of Shay's mind. What Shay said instead was, "Do you want to go to a festival next weekend?"
"A festival?" Delphine repeated, unprepared for the turn in the conversation.

"It's a food and wine festival," Shay clarified. "I have tickets for Saturday. I was going to take my date from last week if it went well, but . . ." She smiled feebly.

"C'est la vie," Delphine murmured.

"такова жизнь," Shay echoed, momentarily confusing Delphine's ears, then filling her with surprise. "So you want to go? It'll probably be a lot like what we always do anyway. Except earlier in the day. Possibly entailing more judgment?"

Delphine chuckled. "Sounds wonderful. Are you sure you want to take me?"

"Rather than my lackluster date?" Shay countered. "Of course, yeah. I don't think I'll be hearing from her again anytime soon. Besides, you might actually know about the wine."

Delphine raised a finger in warning. "That is a stereotype."

"But is it untrue?" Shay asked.

"Do you know your way around vodka?" Delphine asked, the language Shay had spoken registering.

"I've been put down by vodka," Shay said frankly.

Delphine spread her hands in surrender. "And I may know a little about wine."

Delphine showed up in jeans. The sight of her in casual wear nearly made Shay regret being a few minutes late rather than early. Shay hadn't even known Delphine owned a pair of jeans. That little revelation alone would have rendered the day a success if all else proved disappointing, a mental picture from the day to tuck away in a fold of memory.

The festival held its own, however, enveloping them in a riot of sights and sounds and smells. Rows and rows of local flavors, international beverages and cuisines, and culinary art pieces offered themselves for perusal and sampling. Delphine tended toward the salty and savory, Shay for the vibrant and colorful, foods splashed with an abundance of vegetables and crunch, most nearly anything on a crisp, fried tortilla. Her penchant made Delphine smile to herself, but the Frenchwoman kept any comment about Shay's biases—or, rather, prejudices, if Delphine's slant was taken into account—to herself.

The size of the crowd had been fair in the late morning when they arrived, but by early afternoon the number of attendees had swelled. Collective movement slowed from a flowing shuffle to a game of stop-and-go to avoid the unpredictable maneuvers of other bodies and strategic dodging of incoming and slower traffic. Before long the strain of the variable pace announced itself subtly, in the muscles pinched around Delphine's eyes and the stiffening of her gait.

Shay touched Delphine's arm to stop her and get her attention. "Want to go outside and get some air?"

Delphine nodded.

The cooler air of a crisp Canadian day felt welcome after the increasing swelter of the venue. Shay breathed in deeply, enjoying too the sudden drop in decibel levels, where she could pitch her voice
low and ask, "Do you want to stretch your legs out or would you rather sit and rest a bit?"

Delphine glanced over sharply, then smiled, weariness peaking out along the edges of her mouth. "Is it that obvious?"

"We did a lot of standing," Shay said, neither confirming nor denying.

Delphine, forehead furrowing, rubbed at her hip and lower back without reservation for the first time. "Sitting sounds wonderful—but I'm afraid if I do, I won't be able to stand back up."

Shay smiled. "There's a park nearby, if you want to walk."

"Is it far?"

Shay shook her head. "Not far. It's actually just along that trail." She pointed. "We can go as fast as you like."

Delphine nodded to affirm the plan and they set off at a pace it would have been generous to call leisurely. Within a minute a smile crept self-deprecating across Delphine's lips. Shay spied it and asked, "Is something funny?"

"You said we could go as 'fast' as I liked," Delphine said, laughter in her voice. "You don't have to protect my feelings."

Shay grinned. "You know, even walking slowly, your stride is still like twice the length of mine."

Delphine, who had been rolling along her lengthy stride to loosen her hip, shot her a toothy smirk. "One and a half times longer, perhaps."

"One and a half, then," Shay repeated, with a little exasperated flutter of her hands.

"It is important for a scientist to be precise," Delphine declared with authority, but a clear note of teasing rang through her tone.

"This isn't your lab," Shay said, spreading her arms to encompass the greenery around them. "I think it's okay to fudge a number or two in this case."

Delphine smiled in response, which briefly morphed into a grimace. Shay caught the spasm in her expression. Stepping closer, having been walking on Delphine's injured left side, she wordlessly held out a crooked arm. Delphine glanced down and then glanced again. Shay jerked her elbow in a little flap of her arm. Delphine laughed.

"What?" Shay asked. "Go ahead."

Delphine took a second to think about it, then slipped her arm through Shay's. A few steps later, Shay said, "You can lean on me. That's the point, actually. I'm not going to topple over."

"I know," Delphine said softly.

"But?" Shay prompted. "I'm just so small?"

Delphine glanced down at her out of the corner of her eye. "Maybe."

Shay looked up at her skeptically. "You know I'm around average height, right, doctor?"

"You might even be average height in heels," Delphine remarked blithely.
Shay almost—*almost*—hip-checked Delphine for being a smart ass but restrained the reflex in the nick of time. "You're lucky you're a woman in recovery, otherwise I might have answered that with a response you deserve."

Delphine's eyebrows shot up, perhaps wondering what sort of physical retaliation Shay was hinting at. "Then I better enjoy my advantage now."

But some of her weight came bearing down on Shay, Delphine's fingers gripping Shay's arm for balance. The park proper rested farther away than Shay had anticipated, even with a minute increase in their pace as Delphine's muscles warmed and eased, but when the quarry loomed ahead something must have altered in Shay's mien or expression.

"You enjoy being outside?" Delphine asked abruptly.

Shay tilted her head in a gesture akin to a shrug. "I do. I like green stuff."

Delphine nodded thoughtfully. "Yes. I remember there were a number of standing plants in your office."

Shay laughed, tickled at the mention of such a random detail, and clarified, "Yeah, there are a few, but I can't take all the credit for them."

"That's very generous of you," Delphine allowed.

"Credit where credit's due, right?" Shay said. "Isn't that how it goes in the research world?"

Delphine smiled tightly. "That's how you hope it will be but—" She shook her head. "Not always." She exhaled sharply. "There's a lot of . . . currency in credit and not everyone wants to share it." Her eyes scanned the creeping green growth encouraged to reclaim the quarry. "Research is about the knowledge we gain, yes, and the benefits we derive from it, but it's also a race." She smiled suddenly, amused. "Sometimes—most of the time—a very slow race—and then, without warning, very quick."

"Like a sprint to the finish line," Shay said, "at the end of a marathon."

"Yes." There was a pause, then Delphine asked, "Do they sprint at the end of a marathon?"

Shay laughed. "I actually have no idea."

They were quiet for a time, Shay comfortable thanks to the laughter, Delphine relaxed but contemplative, perhaps pursuing the thread further in her mind.

Delphine broke the silence.

"Last week," Delphine said softly, fingers pressing more firmly into Shay's arm, "before you asked me if I would like to go to the festival, you wanted to ask me something else, but you didn't. What was it?"

The question caught Shay off guard. How it extended from no recognizable logic of the conversation preceding it. That Delphine had even caught Shay's abandoned, aborted question. That Delphine had noted it. That she was bringing it up.

Shay focused ahead and shook her head. "It wasn't important."

"That wasn't what I asked," Delphine countered.
She swallowed. "It . . . it wasn't an appropriate question."

Delphine let out a small gasp that drew Shay to look over at her. Amazement colored Delphine's features. "Wasn't appropriate? You know, considering what we were talking about—considering what I was asking you—I find it hard to believe that whatever you were going to ask was . . . inappropriate."

"It was inappropriate," Shay insisted.

Delphine stopped. Her hold on Shay pulled Shay up short as well. With the both of them at a standstill, waiting until Shay looked into her face, Delphine said, "Ask me."

"Why?" Shay demanded.

Delphine studied Shay with her scientist eyes, keen and observant, searching and discerning. "Because for some reason you're afraid to ask me this thing."

Shay looked away, quiet for a breath.

"Not afraid," she intoned, avoiding Delphine's face, "embarrassed."

"What did you want to know?" Delphine asked again, in that soft tone.

"Can we just put this aside?" Shay asked, turning to resume their walk.

Delphine gripped her arm, unmoved and unmoving. "I've asked you questions that were very personal, and you've never avoided them. You may not know this, but to someone like me, not asking me what you wanted to ask makes the question far more intriguing. I like finding answers."

"You're asking for a question," Shay deadpanned.

Delphine smiled. It wasn't all kindness. There lurked a hardness in her gaze. "The question is the answer."

Shay stared back at her. Now they'd dragged out the point and the question was not only embarrassing, it was stupid. She could lie, but all the responses her mind fabricated on the fly sounded trite and transparent, and the patient, but penetrating way Delphine was watching her promised to detect any half-assed deceit.

Shay wasn't sure she even wanted to know the answer to her question. That was partly why she hadn't asked it.

Shay set her mouth in a line. In as even a tone as she could manage, she said, "I was going to ask you if you like sex." Delphine's lips parted. Shay drew a breath short and sharp. "I mean, if you have any interest in it."


Shay resisted. Until Delphine said, "I see."

And nothing more.

Delphine pulled them back into the rhythm of a stroll. Shay fell wordlessly into step. They were quiet again, Delphine thinking her thoughts and Shay seeking the calm of stillness, that place where there
was an absence of thought, where her mind wouldn't chase what she had just said and what Delphine might be thinking. The place in her mind where she wouldn't dwell on and poke at and scratch under the realization she'd had on her date. Because as she'd told Delphine, she'd had a date, yes, and it had been humdrum, yes, but what she hadn't mentioned was that she'd spent much of the time drawing comparisons between the sweet, albeit quiet and a tad shy, woman who dressed well and smiled in furtive spurts and Delphine, that her thoughts had been distracted by the unknowable prospects of what a real date with Delphine might be like, that it hadn't even been halfway through the meeting when Shay had concluded she had a Problem, that her heart had sunk within her chest at the thought that Delphine had wriggled far beneath her skin and lodged somewhere beyond reason and rationale where without effort she plagued Shay's thoughts.

The kicker—the most vexing part of the tableau—was that for all of her senseless preoccupation Shay didn't feel connected to Delphine. Intrigued. Challenged. Confounded. Frustrated. Amused. Sympathetic. Admiring. Sometimes even intimidated.

But not connected.

They were too different for that.

"You know," Delphine said as she swung them around to pause at the edge of the pond and peer into the waters, "I think I can see why you wondered that."

Shay attempted a laugh, but it emerged a sad little gasp. "I told you, it was an embarrassing, inappropriate question."

Delphine, eyes intent on the water's surface, cushioned Shay's resignation with a pause. When she was ready, she said, "I do. If you're still wondering."

Shay shook her head. "I'm sorry I asked."

"Don't be," Delphine said. "I'm not."

Delphine tugged on Shay's arm. "Let's go back. If we go any farther, I'm not sure I'll be able to make it."

They retraced their steps in relative silence, whether because of a newfound awkwardness or because of the degree of concentration Delphine dedicated to the task of the journey or because they had achieved a familiarity with one another that they could be silent and content in one another's presence, Shay couldn't have said. She didn't even know what she felt. She didn't know what she wanted to feel.

Not this, she wanted to think, but if that meant the subtle attraction to Delphine, or the confusion of disappointment and pragmatism that perhaps the relationship between them had been altered irreparably and the prospect that from here they could only grow apart, or the growing conviction that this day and the days before it and that first foolhardy offer to get coffee had all been a bad idea, or the hope that nothing had changed at all and the sober rationale that said nothing would change—Shay didn't know.
Delphine might not have answered Shay with complete honesty.

Not out of ill will or dismissiveness. Simply with the awareness that honesty would have probably entailed a conversation. At minimum, unearthing the truth would require thinking about the question. Delphine had never thought about the question.

About whether she liked sex.

In the immediate aftermath of Shay voicing her question, Delphine had thought: She didn't not like sex.

Right?

Right?

Thus began a spiraling mental orbit of repetition and ambivalent vagaries around the question, even as Delphine's thoughts had quested for the trail that had led Shay to the supposition. The indicators weren't hard to detect, considered from an outside perspective. How efforts to dissuade Shay from pursuing details of her love or sex life by issuing curt responses and being generally reticent could appear as tactics to mask overall indifference and disinterest.

Which they weren't.

At least, Delphine hadn't considered them such.

Rather, Delphine was well aware what kind of impression admitting to sleeping with your boss imparted to most people.

Not that she had spent time in Aldous's bed in recent months. The accident had seen to disrupting those relations. Delphine . . . didn't miss them much. Neither did Aldous, she'd wager. He was, on the whole, a busy man with a devoted, generous following ready to shower him with admiration. When the extent of her injuries had become clear, Aldous had understood better than to approach her, just as he had understood in the first place that he could, the way he knew power and influence and affluence exerted magnetic allure.

Delphine hadn't pursued him.

She hadn't discouraged him either.

It had, in the scheme of things, seemed like the natural progression of their relationship, the inevitable track of her professional career, that he should pluck her from among a pool of excellent candidates, that he should offer her exciting employment, that he should proposition her, that she should accept, that he should, fond and affectionate in his way or perhaps simply capable of separating business and the personal and discerning merit, take her into his confidence and unveil to her proprietary trials and pursuits previously unfathomable, but real and present and underway, far more titillating than any tryst between the sheets could be or had ever been.

Delphine felt the same held true for Aldous. They were not unlike, she and Aldous. He and she felt far more attached to the project—or any myriad of projects—than they did to one another. The sex was just part of the business of it all. An exchange, perhaps, or an assertion of their rightful roles, that
he occupied a rung above, as mentor, that she should defer to him, as mentee, that to occupy his bed was a demonstration of allegiance.

She didn't begrudge him the obeisance.

Delphine had never begrudged anyone the sexual aspect of a relationship. Not when it seemed like the next logical step. Such as the diligent lycée classmate who had passed her notes with doodles that made her laugh and convinced her to go to the cinema with him, who had touted her along for nearly a year before finding it within him to be affronted when she outperformed him on the exams. Or like the self-assured affluent young man who had courted her throughout her university days, taking her to nice restaurants and making her extravagant gifts and exhibiting his sensitivity by insisting she top him, until her career plans guaranteed her several more grueling, time-consuming years of schooling. Or the fellow medical student who was brash and bold and took the time to keep himself laundered and groomed even when all of them were running ragged and near-delirious on the fumes of naps until her ambitions, which would make her a nomad throughout Europe until carrying her overseas, had clashed with his plans to put down roots in their home country.

In any case, sex with any of them hadn't been unengaging or unaffecting. (Right?) As lovers, some of them had been kind and attentive and concerned for her pleasure (as they perceived it). Some of them had even made her laugh. But sex had never been the goal or the reward or the confirmation of the ties she had cultivated with any of those men. In some ways, the sex constituted the price of their company. They enjoyed it and she had enjoyed each of them in their respective charms and advantages. There had been times, she knew, that she had enjoyed seeing and knowing that their arousal, their efforts, their commitment to her had stemmed from the effect she exerted on them—and knowing that she could divorce herself from all of it without compunction, without regret, while they—well, sometimes they could not.

Delphine hadn't shed any tears over them. This state of her affairs had never been anything but normal to her. She'd known—for so long she'd known—the path she would pursue.

None of them had fit—or wanted to fit into—that picture.

DYAD fit that picture. The DYAD and its possibilities had become that picture.

The surprise was having arrived at the goal so soon. To have, without warning, the opportunity to divert her fixed gaze from the goal and see—

What?

That there was room to stretch, to desire more?

That she . . . didn't?

Yet what did that matter?

A year ago it wouldn't have. Delphine had never measured her life by the needs she saw others profess and chase. She hadn't felt left behind by peers entering matrimony or starting families or having affairs or ending marriages or striking new ones. She hadn't lacked for direction or motivation or fulfillment.

So why did one question, from a feel-good hippie who could not have been more diametrically opposed to Delphine in the pursuit of meaning and existence, cast Delphine, at this time and at this point, spinning into self-reflection?

It wasn't the question.
It was why Shay asked the question.

It was the irrational thought the question behind the question put into Delphine's head.

That Shay pitied her.

Which ran contrary to everything Delphine had come to understand about Shay. It wasn't pity that threaded Shay's words, but shame—shame at herself for asking it. If Delphine had told Shay no, she had no interest in sex whatsoever, she had little doubt Shay would have accepted it, without judgment, with understanding.

But what did it mean for Delphine to have declared otherwise when Shay had suspected she was perhaps asexual in the first place?

Pity?

Delphine couldn't stand the thought of Shay pitying her. It made her skin itch. It made her want to display her degrees and credentials and certifications as proof of how much dedication and study had brought her here to DYAD, to this place, at this moment. It made her want to print out all the lab reports and spread them out before the other woman and explain the significance of each in contributing to the advancement of biology and technology. It made her want to scream because Shay pitying her was so utterly baseless a notion and, even if it had been true, what did it matter?

Shay had nothing Delphine wanted.

Right?

Absolutely. Delphine wanted no part in the senseless, groping loneliness that propelled Shay to parsing potential partners through the algorithms of a dating application, nor of the eroding doubts of self-worth that had her fabricating white lies to present herself as someone else that she perceived to be more worthwhile, and certainly had no desire for the undercurrent of an adrift sense of purpose that sent Shay probing at this and that prospect, clinging to this or that spiritual belief.

The mere thought of existing day-to-day like that pulled at Delphine's sanity like a black hole absorbing matter.

And yet.

Delphine had never gotten to know someone like Shay before. Someone who despite all of the above was still happy, still open, still hopeful in the possibilities of life, still eager to believe in a greater goodness or some kind of universal balancing scales, who believed in the worth of someone she didn't even know and hadn't yet met but believed existed, who wanted so badly to give to someone everything at her disposal to give, so badly that even Delphine could see and sense it.

It was this person whose pity Delphine didn't want. It was from this person that Delphine had withheld any mention of her relationship with Aldous, her boss, because she hadn't wanted to see the knowledge alter the way Shay looked at her. She hadn't wanted to know if the information would engender disgust or concern or condescension or wariness or . . . pity.

Delphine didn't even have a reason to think Shay would pity her.

She just didn't want to know Shay could.

Because what else might have been done out of pity? Was that first overture to get a cup of coffee together an act of pity? How else to explain the offer when Delphine now had a good sense that
extending affiliation beyond the massage table was far from a regular or normal occurrence between Shay and her patients? Was the way Shay indulged all Delphine's questions, her probing and her prodding, forms of pity, some bloated sense that Delphine was a lost soul, a lost cause?

The idea, even a whiff of suspicion, that this was the case, had always been the case, should have made Delphine angry.

But it didn't.

Because if Delphine thought about it, she knew Shay had only wondered if she were interested in sex out of curiosity—as Delphine would have felt, pure and unalloyed, and that she had felt about a number of Shay's quirks beyond her purview of experience—and possibly, perhaps more importantly, out of concern. Because Delphine had spent hours beneath hands both strong and gentle, confident and cautious, searching and discerning, piercing and soothing. She had passed many more hours chatting and laughing with, learning of and exploring through the person behind that touch.

Which was why Shay's pity was such an untenable thought. Not because Delphine considered herself superior. Because she had come to regard Shay as a person. A decent person. An interesting person. A comforting person.

There were so few specific people whose welfare Delphine weighed and regarded with expansive consideration. She cared about people, of course, about the whole of human health, about eliminating disease, about tipping the odds in the favor of *homo sapiens*, but individuals demanded so much attention, so much more nuance and nurture, so much handling and tolerance and negotiation. Her work aimed toward the general, to maximizing dividends and the applications of treatments.

Shay operated in the opposite manner. Shay performed on a case-by-case basis. Shay was social and sociable beyond the niceties of politeness. It made sense for her to have a lot of acquaintances, to make the effort to find companions, to throw herself into the toils of forming connections, to turn a patient and stranger into a . . . friend.

If that's what Delphine was to Shay. Delphine had called herself Shay's friend once, but she'd said it because it was the socially accepted and expected term. Shay hadn't objected.

The only one who might have had reservations with the terminology was probably Delphine herself.

But perhaps Delphine had begun to think—

Well. Perhaps she wasn't the only one thinking. Maybe Shay was rethinking. After that Saturday, there was a period of missed meetings, a string of Friday proposals that Shay answered with unspecified excuses and absences, the first of which had brought their quiet goodbyes on Saturday fleetingly and ambiguously into Delphine's mind, the third of which reared the consideration that their time together, that thing that might have been a friendship, was at an end.

The fourth Friday Delphine looked at her phone, regarded it silently, and set it aside unlocked.

An hour later, a message from Shay arrived asking if she'd liked to meet for dinner.
Shay was early, an anomaly atop the anomaly that there could be anomalies between them, and being shown to a table when Delphine arrived. As Shay's bag slipped from her shoulder, Delphine replaced it with her hand. Shay started beneath the contact and jerked around, but smiled, relaxing, when she saw Delphine.

Her smile, Delphine noted, didn't bring a light to her eyes. Shay looked tired.

"Hey," Shay said on an exhalation. "I was just about to sit down and text you."

Delphine smiled and leaned down to press a kiss to one cheek and then the other. Shay turned her head to accommodate each gesture. Delphine, alert, noted that Shay didn't lean away, that, really, nothing occurred outside of the usual. "I'm glad you got here early. It's filling up now."

"My last appointment ended up being only a consultation, so I got away early," Shay explained as she settled into her chair.

The time slot had been the one Delphine had regularly occupied and though she knew it bore no significance, something about it did prick a sense of possessiveness. "Will they be back?"

"We'll see," Shay said. "He didn't seem keen on the idea. I think he was a little shy about being touched."

"Maybe he was shy about having you touch him," Delphine suggested with a light dusting of teasing. As she would have any other time. Though any other time before it wouldn't have felt like a projection of lightness and mirth.

"Nah," Shay said with a shake of her head. "I got the impression that if he had any ideas about me touching him, it was more along the lines of having doubts that I was strong enough to help him."

Delphine smiled. "There is a surprising amount of strength in your hands that isn't suggested by your appearance."

"Are you calling me scrawny?" Shay asked, not even bothering to divert her attention from the menu.

"No," Delphine said delicately, "but you are petite."

Shay cocked her head, as if to pick out sounds in the air. "Are you saying that the way we English speakers use 'petite' or are you just calling me small in French?"

"You are small," Delphine said frankly.

"But capable of doing my job," Shay stated archly.

"I didn't say you weren't," Delphine said. "I know very well how capable you are."

That earned half of a smile. "Damn straight. But it doesn't really matter if he comes back or not. There was a flood of referrals that came in and I've been super busy. It's been a challenge fitting everyone in. I was actually kinda glad that this guy only wanted a consultation. Not that I don't want to help him, but . . . a little break was nice."

Delphine nodded slowly. "So it has been . . . all work and no play?"
Shay exhaled a little laugh. "Yeah, a little like that." Her eyes scanned Delphine's face.

"What?" Delphine asked.

"That phrase makes me think of *The Shining,"* Shay said. "Have you seen it?"

"The film?" Delphine asked, one eyebrow quirking. "Yes."

"Huh," Shay stifled into the menu. "I didn't really take you for the horror movie type."

"I don't mind them," Delphine corrected. "I don't find the supernatural ones to be very scary."

Shay grinned to herself.

"But," Delphine continued, "one of my exes very much enjoyed horror films and we watched many of them together."

Shay's head rose incrementally at the mention of an ex. Delphine was watching for it. For her reaction. It was, they both knew, the first reference to a romantic relationship that Delphine had made.

"Yeah?" Shay said. Delphine hummed in affirmation. "I think he liked the excuse to cuddle. I think he wanted me to be scared."

Shay eased back into the grin. "Did he know you were destined to be dissecting cadavers and peering into human insides?"

"He did," Delphine said, "though I had not yet begun medical studies. It wasn't the, um, bloodiness —"

"Gore?" Shay suggested.

Delphine nodded. "He didn't like the gore. He liked the suspense." Delphine lifted a shoulder in a careless gesture. "So he claimed."

"You didn't believe him?" Shay wondered.

Delphine shook her head. "Not that. I didn't know what he was referring to."

Shay giggled. "He must have been so disappointed."

"He bore it well," Delphine allowed. "It didn't stop him from making me watch the films with him."

Shay's eyebrows flicked up and down with a self-contained amusement just as their waiter appeared at her elbow. They sent him off with an order of beverages and a few more minutes to decide on items of actual sustenance.

"So, the past few weeks," Delphine introduced carefully, "has only been work for you?"

Shay's form assumed a stiff stillness, which was distinct from the unstudied stillness that often inhabited her body. A listening type of stillness, as if her skin were primed to detect the minute alterations in the air currents.

"Pretty much," Shay replied with a casualness that rang with the effort that Delphine had felt
possessed her earlier. She eyed Delphine over the top of her menu. "Why do you ask?"

Delphine considered the wisdom of proceeding. Perhaps this hesitation, this anxious parsing and ferreting of possible outcomes, was what Shay had felt checking and harboring her own question. Shay watched her intently. Delphine heeded her own demand for frankness of that Saturday three weeks prior. "You hadn't mentioned it before. I thought—" Delphine wet her lips. "I thought perhaps you had been avoiding me."

Shay sat quiet, gaze centered on Delphine, then gradually retreating inward, sliding away. The corners of her mouth dimpled and dipped. "You mean since the festival?"

Delphine nodded.

"Because . . ." Shay prompted, deliberately trailing off.

"Because you were so quiet when we left," Delphine provided. "And . . . I didn't hear from you after."

Shay's gaze quested about unseeingely. Cautiously, measured, with the fragility of one navigating shards of glass, Shay asked, "Should I have been avoiding you?"

"You mean was I upset?" Delphine asked with a sprinkling of incredulity.

Shay nodded. "Yeah."

"No," barked Delphine. She laughed, with unexpected ease, venting some of the tension that had sat and stewed in her muscles from the outset of this meeting. "No, I—I told you. It was intriguing."

Delphine tapped out a series of beats against the corner of her menu. "Informative."

"You mean it clearly demonstrated that I'm an ass," Shay said to her menu.

Delphine tilted her head, smiling. "A donkey?"

Shay glanced at her with annoyance, but her mouth twitched on the verge of her own smile. "Don't pull that."

Delphine grinned. "Well, I am not the only one here who knows more than one language."

Shay shook her head. "You're the only one here fluent in more than one language."

"So you're not fluent in Russian?" Delphine wondered.

"I just know a little bit here and there. Whatever I picked up from my grandmother, mostly." Shay smiled to herself, as if at some private joke. "I probably know as much Russian as I do Spanish."

Delphine sucked in a breath through her teeth in a tease of admonishment. "There are other worthy Romance languages to learn."

"Quite possibly," Shay agreed amiably, but not ceding the victory.

Delphine smiled, feeling no need to contest or challenge. Her body relaxed into the rhythms, the atmosphere settled, as if they were now fully slipping back into a natural give-and-take, casting away whatever misgiving had festered in Delphine's mind—her imagination—over the course of estrangement.

"For the record," Shay added, eyes scanning the pages, "I was avoiding you."
Delphine's smile faded.


Delphine rubbed the corner of the menu between her thumb and forefinger. When a lengthy silence indicated that Shay was done, Delphine ventured, "Were you . . . okay?"

Shay nodded. "Yeah. It's just something that happens sometimes. I have these . . . rough patches. Where I don't feel fit for human interaction." She shrugged, a gesture crafted for casualness and carelessness, but neither of which were present in the lines of Shay's body. "I make for really bad company so . . . I try to spare people that." She chanced another look at Delphine. "It wasn't anything you did or anything like that, it just happens."

The texture of the leatherbound menu yielded its softness to Delphine's restless finger. With consideration, Delphine hazarded in a hush, "Depression?"

"Rough patch," Shay asserted. "Nothing that meditation can't help. Stuff like that."

"You're okay?" Delphine asked.

"Mmhm," Shay said, nodding. She broadcasted a feeble smile across the table. "It's not something new. I manage it." She took a deep breath and let it out in a controlled release. She peered into Delphine's face. Not quite into her eyes, but directly at her. "I'm telling you because you were right, but so that there's no misunderstanding—this wasn't about you. And if it happens again you don't . . . have to worry."

Delphine absorbed the explanation long enough to be interrupted by the waiter with their drinks and the expectation of an order. Preoccupied, Delphine named the first familiar item she could recall being on the menu. When they were alone again, Delphine said, "But doesn't knowing make people worry more?"

Shay shrugged, a smile brushed with amusement on her lips. "At first, maybe? But you get used to it. I think you learn that I'll always come back eventually. That it's okay to give me some space."

So this was an occurrence that not only happened but had been happening for some time. Maybe had happened, quietly and undetected, but for a vague impression Delphine had once had early in their acquaintance. And yet Delphine had brushed off the inkling the more she saw of Shay's generally sunny demeanor, none the wiser.

"But," Delphine said, tracing a line across the linen tablecloth, as if to blot out her sudden disquiet, "it's not good, is it, to be alone at a time like that?"

Shay folded her arms upon the table and hunched forward. "My rough patches aren't . . . debilitating. I can get out of bed. I can get through my routine. I make sure I eat meals. It's more like a . . . disconnection. Like I'm . . . waiting to snap back into place. To try to come back—" She untangled a hand and tapped the tabletop. "—here. To be present again."

"Okay," Delphine breathed, feeling something old stir and brush up through her abdomen. "What if that sounds worrying?"

Shay smiled in a manner that sidled up to a laugh. "People check up on me. I replied to your messages, didn't I? I'm capable of letting people know I'm still alive."

Delphine simmered in quiet.
Shay peered at her with intensifying concentration until finally she asked, "What are you thinking?"

"I was thinking," Delphine said with a heavy sigh, "that I don't know where you live. I couldn't check up on you even if I wanted to."

"You know where I work," Shay pointed out. "I don't even know that about you."

"My work is very confidential," Delphine replied automatically with the soft air of absentmindedness, still processing the truth of her admission, that she didn't know where Shay lived, that she hadn't cared, but now felt pressed with a sense of the information's worth.

"Right," Shay agreed, with the good nature of having heard such a response countless times before. "In the military, every other thing was 'confidential.' A friend and I used to joke that whenever someone used 'confidential' you could never tell if what was so secret were efforts to save the world or destroy it."

Delphine's attention returned to the conversation. When their eyes met, Shay smiled, the twinkle lurking in the depths of her eyes.

"I told that story to a girl I was dating once," Shay added. "You know what she said? Why would you have to keep saving the world a secret?"

Consternation pinched at Delphine's eyes. "What did you tell her?"

Shay shrugged. "I didn't tell her anything. By that point I was already planning to leave the military."

"Are you asking me, then, if I'm working to save the world or destroy it?" Delphine queried.

A smile curved Shay's lips. "No."

"No?" Delphine echoed. "You're not curious? You're not worried?"

"I might be," Shay conceded, "but the military also taught me that confidential means confidential. I don't expect you to tell me."

Delphine smiled at the tabletop. "I can't."

Shay smiled impishly, more of her familiar energy surfacing. "You can't tell me what you do that's so confidential or you can't tell me whether you're working to save the world or destroy it?"

Delphine tapped the table, twice, in quick succession. "I can't."

"Right. Confidential. My only choice is to keep wondering, then," Shay declared blithely.

"If you're allowed to wonder," Delphine posited, "then am I allowed to worry?"

"You're not allowing me to wonder," Shay pointed out. "You're leaving me to wonder. And I didn't say you couldn't worry. I was just trying to express that you shouldn't, that there's nothing to worry about."

"Then we're clear," Delphine said. "You can wonder. I can worry."

"I don't want you to worry," Shay said flatly.

"That's too bad," Delphine lamented, "because I do enjoy your wondering."
Shay eyed her thoughtfully. "If that's the case, it's either a really boring secret or a really juicy secret."

"It can't be something in between?" Delphine wondered.

Shay leaned forward and subjected her to a narrow-eyed scrutiny. Reaching a conclusion, Shay shook her head. "It's definitely boring or juicy."

Delphine smiled, not laughing, but the sensation of laughter warm in her chest. "It's good to see you again, Shay."

Shay's head canted a few skeptical degrees. "Yeah?"

"Yes," Delphine breathed, as a sincere assurance to Shay's flippancy, as an answer to her questions. Shay nodded, gaze drifting to the tabletop. "Feels good to be here."

It did.
Chapter 9

"Where do you live?" Delphine slipped casually into a lull in conversation the following week.

Shay shook her head, bemused and exasperated and a little uncertain if she should be touched or concerned. She eyed Delphine critically. "Are you asking what general vicinity I live in or for my actual address?" Shay cocked her head. "Are you looking for a new place? I think there are vacancies in my building."

Delphine smiled tightly, an indication that she recognized the admonishment in Shay's teasing. "No, I'm not. It occurred to me that I have no idea where you reside. I know where your office is, of course, so I know when we meet after hours whether you have to travel far or not, but I don't know if you then have to go far to get home."

"Uh huh," Shay droned. "And that's all you were thinking?"

"Well," Delphine continued, undeterred, almost, Shay had to admit, admirably so, "I was also thinking that we don't always have to meet like this."

Shay raised her eyebrows. "You mean stay in instead of go out? You're proposing that we kick off our shoes, get cozy, gossip, and play board games?"

Delphine's confusion manifested immediately. "You play board games? Like chess?"

Shay giggled. "Less like chess, more like Monopoly—but not Monopoly. There was an incident with Monopoly where my brothers almost disowned each other."

"They're competitive?"

Shay nodded. "Oh, yeah. I can even be a little competitive."

"Really?" Delphine gave her a reconsidering study. "How competitive?"

"Maybe not your level of competitive," Shay cautioned to temper any fermenting expectations.

"My level?" Delphine wondered, all innocence. "You think I'm competitive?"

"Oh, I don't know, maybe just a little," Shay said airily. "What with your MD, PhD, and super secret job."

Delphine laughed. "Okay, I can see how those things would make you think I'm . . ." She trailed off, as if the English eluded her.


"I was going to say something like 'ambitious,'" Delphine hedged. "But whether I am ambitious or . . . an overachiever, that would not necessarily make me competitive."

"Are you competitive?" Shay asked bluntly.

"Yes," confirmed Delphine without hesitation. "In certain matters. But I will contend that does not necessarily follow from being ambitious, as you are suggesting."

Shay shrugged. "If you want to think that."
Delphine eyed her blankly for a sizeable stretch.

"What?" queried Shay.

"What is the phrase?" sought Delphine aloud, frowning. "A taste of one's own medicine? It's a very bitter élixir."

Shay laughed, startled into it.

"You're not correct," Delphine said, to burst Shay's bubble.

"But in this case I'm not wrong," Shay retorted, calming down. She clasped her hands and leaned upon them, smiling sunnily, marveling internally that Delphine managed to surprise her again and again.

"Mmm," Delphine intoned in a frequency that achieved neutral. "You are avoiding the original question."

Shay smirked. "I'll trade you my address for yours."

Delphine's lips parted, emitting no sound. Shay's eyebrows leapt and fell.

"You hesitated," Shay pointed out.

Delphine's mouth pulled one way in a half-smile. "I was trying to determine if you already have that information. I filled out so many forms for so many different things, I can't remember."

"Mmhmm," Shay hummed sweetly. "And I'm sure you were also trying to figure out when you wanted to invite me over."

From the sharp glance that answered her words Shay knew the notion hadn't passed through the doctor's mind, but Delphine said, "Would you like to come over?"

Shay's head jerked to one side, in an aborted shake of her head, unsure if the invitation was a genuine one. "You . . . commit to a long, hard game, Delphine Cormier."

Mischief brightened Delphine's gaze. "Some might call me an overachiever."

Shay surrendered to that shake of her head.

"Well?" Delphine prodded.

Shay breathed out heavily. "Now it's weird."

Delphine's eyebrows clenched together. "It wasn't weird . . . until right now?" Her gaze softened. Shay shifted, uneasy beneath those eyes, a twinge racing between her gut and her chest. "Why is it weird?"

Shay sighed and said in a resigned rush, "Because you're inviting me over to your place because I made you a silly offer because you're only asking to know where I live because now you have this idea that you might need to check up on me one day, whereas two weeks ago you didn't care."

Against the deluge of words, Delphine sat expressionless, watching Shay steadily. She spoke in softened tones. "Yes, two weeks ago it hadn't crossed my mind yet. One week ago you brought the gap in my knowledge to my attention. Now it may be that I'm simply . . . curious."
"To know where I live?" Shay asked, skeptical.

"Well," Delphine said slowly, "to see it."

Shay stewed in the answer, eyes narrowing on Delphine's expectant features, until she gasped out a laugh, shaking her head. "Now it's definitely too weird."

"What, why?" protested Delphine.

"Because I made it weird," Shay declared grandly, hoping to leave it at that.

"No," Delphine insisted. She laid a hand on Shay's forearm. "Then make it unweird."

"Can't," Shay said, rendered less eloquent by a preoccupation with the odd phrasing of Delphine's entreaty.

Delphine's fingers curled and gripped, eyes coolly assessing. "You don't want to tell me."

"I don't," admitted Shay.

"Why not?" Delphine asked.

"Maybe . . . I've already told you too much," Shay muttered. She ducked her head to disguise a self-deprecating smile. "I can't even imagine you being in my place now."

"No?" countered Delphine, gaze raking over Shay's face. Her hand withdrew. Her lips pursed. "Okay." She raised her glass to her lips, sipped, and put the tumbler down with exaggerated care. "One day, then."

She made it sound like a promise.
On a spring day Aldous Leekie summoned Delphine. Such office affairs had the air of ceremony, the request descending through channels via a call from his secretary, never by SMS or email, and Delphine's arrival, though punctual to the time designated, intruding upon whatever he was engaged in. Delphine rarely found Aldous Leekie in an idle state. If it wasn't a project occupying his attention, it was people, his network cast far and wide and into the depths of scientific, political, social, and economic movers. So Delphine's impression of him had ever been and so stemmed her admiration of his ambitions, of the restless questing of his mind, the breadth of imagination, stamina, and tenacity that encompassed and pursued so much at once.

When Delphine stepped onto the floor, the secretary offered her a perfunctory nod of a gatekeeper and waved her inside. Through the glass of the door and walls Delphine saw Aldous seated at a microscope, his back to them. She let herself inside.

"Ah, Delphine," Aldous acknowledged her arrival, eyes never straying from the eyepiece of the microscope. A monitor at hand projected an image of tissue suspended in an aqueous fluid.

In the privacy of being unobserved, Delphine's judgment conducted a brief debate on a form of address. "Hello, Aldous."

A smile stretched his mouth as he turned at last to face her. "It's good to see you."

Her chin dipped. "Likewise."

His eyes scanned her from head to toe, not unlike in the study of a specimen. "You look well. How are you feeling?"

"Much improved, thank you," Delphine assured him. It wasn't unlike him to ask after her health, but the subtext of his question triggered the realization that it had been quite some time since they'd seen and spoken to one another. The accident had been a disruption, yes, but Aldous Leekie was a perpetually engaged man. With his book and his speaking engagements and the promotion of Neolutionism. With establishing and nurturing his contacts among industry leaders and thinkers on the forefront. With his research side projects. With Project Leda. All these demands on his time propelled him around the globe. Success had rendered him a nomad, as much as it made him visible.

Delphine had contemplated his career as a possible model for her own, yet to see him now she couldn't have said she had missed—or envied—his presence.

"I'm glad to hear it," Aldous said, warmly, "because I have a proposal for you."

Dinner, was Delphine's immediate thought, because sometimes Aldous enjoyed a grand gesture. Very well. Delphine felt up to it.

Aldous continued, "How would you like to become more involved with the Project?"

Already halfway to accepting an imagined invitation unextended, Delphine's mind stuttered, stumbling on Aldous's pronunciation of "Project," the undeniable emphasis that transformed the word into a proper noun, which only ever meant one project, The Project: Project Leda.

"Yes," Delphine breathed. It was the only answer. Had ever been the only answer, whatever Aldous proposed.
Aldous nodded. "What I'm about to tell you is confidential and cannot be discussed with anyone authorized below the highest security clearance. You understand?"

Delphine nodded. "Of course."

"There's been an unexpected development," Aldous said. His expression darkened. "It could be an isolated incident. It might not be. What we know is that one of the subjects has been exhibiting alarming symptoms. Of what, we haven't determined, but signs indicate some sort of illness. Our top priority, you understand, is to determine if this originates in a genetic predisposition. You know what that could mean."

Delphine nodded.

Aldous tapped the countertop with a finger. "We've brought the subject here for treatment and observation. Without revealing anything of her nature or our concerns to her, of course."

"Of course," Delphine echoed softly.

"Nealon is heading up the investigation," Aldous announced. "I know you haven't worked with him, but I suggested you for his team, in the capacity of an assistant, given your standing and experience. He approved. Now the decision is yours."

"Yes, I would be honored," said Delphine without hesitation. Of course. Of course.

"Excellent," Aldous said. The contentedness of his little smile conveyed that he'd expected nothing less. "Report to Nealon first thing Monday morning. He'll provide you the specifics of the case."

Delphine nodded, then stood in awkward silence. Waiting. For another matter. For that invitation.

Aldous watched her, eyebrows slowly rising.

"Thank you for the opportunity," Delphine said at last.

Aldous nodded, dismissive, careless. As if radically changing someone's career was an act he performed all the time.

Delphine turned and made for the door. Aldous's voice caught her as she laid a hand upon the handle. "Delphine."

She swiveled.

"You'll keep me updated," he said, issuing a directive.

A flash of confusion jolted through Delphine, even as she automatically replied, "Yes."

"Good," Aldous intoned simply. He turned back to the microscope.

Delphine took it as permission to leave.

* *

Delphine sat exceptionally fixated on the liquid in her glass that Friday. So much so that Shay was pretty convinced that Delphine didn't hear a word she was saying.
So certain that, in as bland a narrative tone as she could muster, Shay said, "So my last client today decided he would derive the most benefit from our session if he were naked. I don't mind. I put down towels for his modesty, I leave the room so he can undress and lie down, and I come back and I do my thing. But in the middle he says he really needs to go to the bathroom, and before I can do anything, he stands up. The towels fall away, we're standing in the room together, he's naked, and I notice he has these amazing, beautiful eyes. We stare at each other and before I know it, I'm in his arms, he's kissing me, I'm kissing him—"

"We have sex right then and there and now I'm straight."

Silence. Not a batted eyelash.

Shay cleared her throat. "Aren't you happy for me?"

"Hm, what?" Delphine started, turning to her sharply.

Shay giggled. "Where are you?"

"I'm sorry," Delphine said on a sigh. She raised a hand and rested her fingertips on her forehead. "I'm just—I found out today I have a very big meeting on Monday and now I'm just—" She blew her breath out, lips blustering.

"Like a presentation?" Shay asked.

Delphine shook her head. "No. But an opportunity. A big one. For me."

Shay nodded. "And you're nervous. Anything you have to prepare?"

"No," Delphine frowned. "At least, not that I know."

"You'll do fine," Shay assured her.

Delphine sat back and crossed her arms. "I don't doubt my abilities. I'm unsure . . . where this may lead."

Confusion put a dent above one of Shay's eyebrows. "Is it a promotion?"

"More like a transfer, I think. I'll be working with new people." Delphine shook her head, lips pressed together. "I don't know. I didn't see it coming."

"But you want it," Shay deduced.

"Yes," Delphine said faintly, head bobbing in a nod, "I do."

"Okay," Shay said, leaning forward, "then maybe we should do something this weekend to distract you from thinking about it too much."

"Hm?" Delphine's eyes cut over with interest. "Like what?"

"Want to see a movie?"

Delphine received the suggestion blankly. Her smile was slow in coming. "I have not seen a film in the cinema since I moved. I have no idea what is showing."

"Neither do I," confessed Shay. She plucked up her phone and held it aloft. "But we can find out in two seconds."
Delphine smiled. Tautly. But it was a smile.

Dr. Nealon surveyed Delphine with a look that optimistically read as disinterested, pessimistically as unimpressed, and realistically was likely only evaluative. Where Aldous was gregarious, charismatic, and reassuring by way of small talk, Nealon . . . was not.

They'd never met before. Delphine knew of him but if he had had even the smallest notion of her existence prior to this moment, he made no show of it. He peered at her as if peering over spectacles. He wasn't wearing any.

"You know why you're here?" he asked flatly.

"One of the subjects has fallen ill," Delphine said evenly. "We are currently diagnosing and treating her."

Nealon cocked his head. "One of the subjects?"

"Of Project Leda," Delphine supplied.

Nealon nodded. "That'll do."

Delphine released the breath she'd held under Nealon's detached assessment. He slipped a pen from the front pocket of his lab coat, placed it atop a manila folder in front of him, and slid the package across the desk toward her. "You need to sign this confidentiality agreement."

His attention hovered expectant on Delphine as she slowly picked up the pen and opened the folder. Delphine got the distinct impression she shouldn't waste anyone's time reading the document. Nonetheless, she took a moment to skim the pages. Nothing leapt out as surprising or unusual. She uncapped the pen, a weighty fountain pen, and scribbled her signature beside the "x."

Nealon reclaimed the folder and pen promptly. "As a precaution, assume that all the staff you see on assignment are unaware of the reality of the situation. Many of them are. We are, however, all on the same page: To diagnose and treat an as-of-yet unclassified illness."

Another nondescript folder appeared on the desk before Delphine. She reached for it with a bit of hesitation. Nealon made no move or sound to stop her. With more self-assurance than she felt, Delphine took up the folder and delved into its contents.

"This is Jennifer Fitzsimmons," Nealon intoned as Delphine's eyes picked out corroborating information off the pages. "Age twenty-eight, an American citizen, and up until very recently one of the healthiest and fittest among the subjects. She's a teacher and swim coach, almost had a shot at the Olympics a few years ago, maintains a healthy diet and regular exercise regimen."

"About two or three months ago we began to notice changes in the numbers of her blood work. High lymphocyte count. High CPR and ESR. We weren't sure if we were seeing a serious trend and had no way to conduct more thorough examinations until Jennifer herself took further action. When she developed difficulty breathing, she consulted her physician. The tests found polyps in her lungs."

"Could they be tumors? Cancer?" Delphine hazarded.

Nealon shook his head. "No. The leading preliminary theory is that we're looking at something autoimmune. It may explain why, with how healthy and robust Jennifer was, her condition seems to
be rapidly progressing."

Delphine raised her head. "Rapidly?"

"Considering the time between when we first detected anomalies in Jennifer's blood tests and the extent to which the tumors have affected multiple tissues, it looks to be very aggressive."

Delphine frowned. "The tumors have spread from the lungs?"

"From what we can tell, they didn't originate in the lungs."

Delphine processed the implication. "But they are already in her lungs."

Nealon nodded and pointed at the folder in Delphine's hand with a finger. "Bring yourself up to speed. Miguel will help."

"Miguel?"

"Dr. Miguel Estrada. The primary physician who will be attending to Jennifer's case. You'll be assisting him."

"Not you, Dr. Nealon?" Delphine asked, carefully.

"I will be supervising and keeping apprised of the developments, but I have numerous other duties to see to, as well." Nealon eyed her. "Any other questions?"

Delphine shook her head. "No."

Nealon nodded briskly. "Then I'll introduce you to Miguel."

* *

Dr. Miguel Estrada gave Delphine the instant impression of an affable uncle filled with good cheer. He smiled. A lot.

As strange as it was to think, he didn't feel like a likely candidate to be a highly placed DYAD employee.

After making introductions, Dr. Nealon promptly abandoned them, but Delphine was almost glad of it. Estrada exuded a comfortable air that put her far more at ease than Nealon's distance. He shooed her into a chair and was quick to provide and review with her all the information they had amassed so far in terms of labs, tests, and analyses.

"Have you begun a course of treatment?" Delphine asked.

"Not yet. There is some debate as to how we should proceed."

"What are you thinking?" Delphine asked.

Estrada rubbed the stubble dotting his chin. "I want to lead with immunosuppressants and see how her system responds. As you can see, the spreading is very aggressive. I think our first priority should be to inhibit and contain the extent, if we can. If that course is successful, we might be able to reverse it as well."

Delphine nodded. "The patient is here?"
"Right now?" Estrada asked, which made Delphine straighten up. "No. She's scheduled to come in this afternoon for an MRI."

"Scheduled to come in? She's not admitted to our care ward?"

"We thought it would be more comfortable to settle her outside of our facilities. We provided her and Greg, her partner, with housing nearby." Estrada smiled. "I hope the arrangement is more encouraging. Being here all day might dampen her spirits. She's very positive, but every little bit can help."

"Was it your suggestion?" Delphine wondered.

"Greg's. He's shown a lot of care and concern. He's understandably anxious but he's doing what he can."

Delphine nodded slowly.

"You're anxious to meet her?" Estrada asked, kindly.

Delphine nodded. "I am."

"Her appointment is at two. I'll leave those with you and see you there?"

* *

There was little in the way of personal information among the files that Estrada left with her. Delphine wasn't much surprised. Project Leda was very carefully compartmentalized in a manner that rendered it difficult for any single technician or researcher to assemble the full picture, the strict secrecy surrounding it obstructing even the aggregation of pieces. Aldous was one of the privileged overseers, Nealon most likely another. She and Estrada were cogs, slotted together now, but uncertain as to the other's shape and size.

Jennifer Fitzsimmons was an easier read, medically. Delphine reviewed a history that dated back several years. It spoke of up-to-date vaccinations, no major illnesses, and a shoulder injury that, though reoccurring, had not incurred surgery. She'd had her tonsils and wisdom teeth removed and had regularly undergone annual physicals. Fitzsimmons had been a picture of health.

Until she wasn't.

To Jennifer that meant the first pangs of difficulty breathing. To her doctor that translated to the discovery of the growth of polyps on her lungs.

DYAD had had evidence of the numbers changing sooner than that.

Delphine frowned.

* *

She was short.

The realization hit Delphine belatedly, when she at last stood before the self-contained form radiating energy and uncertainty. Technically Delphine knew exactly how tall the woman was—163 cm—and she wasn't unused to her own height being emphasized (and remarked upon), but technically Delphine knew a lot and technically Jennifer Fitzsimmons was a miracle of science and had no right to be real and standing in front of her.
"Hi," the woman said brightly, smiling widely and thrusting out a hand with enthusiasm. "I'm Jennifer."

"Dr. Cormier," Delphine introduced herself, slipping her hand into Jennifer's. Jennifer's grip was strong and firm, a quick squeeze that seized Delphine in her grasp. "Enchantée."

"It's, um, nice to meet you, too," Jennifer stammered slightly. She appeared a little startled. Not as startled and preoccupied as Delphine digesting the marvel of genetic blessings that had formed the wondrous reality of the chipper, fair-faced, broad-smiled, curly-haired woman. "Are you French . . . Canadian?"

"Oh, no," Delphine said. "I'm from Paris."

"Oh. Wow," Jennifer breathed, impressed. "Oh! This is Greg," she added, indicating the nervous-looking, young, attractively scruffy man beside her. "My boyfriend."

He and Delphine shook hands. His handshake was perfunctory. Delphine was more struck by the way he eyed her, the constant shifting of his gaze around the space. The anxiety Delphine expected to encounter in Jennifer seemed rather to inhabit him.

Jennifer studied Delphine, confusion inscribing hesitation upon her face.

"Yes?" Delphine prompted gently.

"I'm sorry," Jennifer rushed to apologize, a faint blush lending pink to her cheeks. She wrung her hands. "I . . . I've been meeting or hearing about a lot of doctors since I got here, but I understand that a lot of them aren't . . . medical . . . doctors."

Delphine nodded in understanding. "Ah. Right. Yes. Many of the doctors at the DYAD are research scientists. Some, like myself, are also licensed to practice medicine. I will be working with Dr. Estrada."

"So . . . two doctors. For just me. That sounds pretty . . ." Jennifer's expression cracked, betraying the effort of cheeriness. " . . . serious."

"What is it they say?" Delphine offered. "Two minds are better than one?"

She smiled at Jennifer, as openly as she could, the way she pictured Shay did. After a moment, Jennifer attempted a tentative smile in return.

Monday night, Delphine received an SMS: *How'd it go?*

Delphine replied: *Fine. I think.*

Shay's answer arrived prompt: (:}
Aldous requested to see Delphine at the end of the week. Delphine welcomed the summons. She had questions.

So did Aldous. They traded quickly through the niceties, Aldous keeping them locked in the script despite all parties' lack of interest in the pleasantries, before Aldous opened the floor, saying, "How was your week?"

"Informative," Delphine replied succinctly.

Aldous smiled. "I take it Dr. Estrada has been very forthcoming?"

Dr. Estrada's name had never before passed between herself and Aldous, but Delphine wasn't surprised. "He answers my questions." She faltered a beat. "Those I venture to ask. I'm unsure whether or not he and I can . . . talk openly with one another."

"Generally speaking," Aldous drawled, "it's good practice to assume that you can't speak openly with anyone."

"Unless I'm speaking with you," Delphine tested.

Aldous smiled.

"How did you find Jennifer?" he asked, affording Delphine's comment no dignity—nor providing explicit guidelines on the point of Dr. Estrada and open communication.

"She's lovely," Delphine said, using the first word that came to mind, a bit surprised that it was that: Lovely. "Nice, polite, eager to cooperate. She's very . . ."

Aldous raised his eyebrows.

"Trusting," Delphine finished. She studied Aldous's features. "With me. With Dr. Estrada. With her boyfriend, Greg, especially. She seems very attached to him."

Aldous cocked his head. "You say that like the reverse isn't true."

"That's not what I meant to imply," Delphine said. "From what I've seen, Greg is very . . . devoted to her. They are never apart."

Aldous nodded.

Delphine pursed her lips in thought. "He is . . . overwhelmed, however. Not surprising. It is to his credit that he has remained at her side." Aldous's expression displayed no shift in the slightest as she carried on. Delphine wet her lips. "Have you met Greg?"

"Briefly," Aldous replied.

Delphine nodded slowly. "Jennifer told me that it was Greg who discovered the DYAD Institute and solicited our help. Your help, actually."
"Are you trying to get me to toot my own horn, Delphine?" Aldous teased, but there was a hard set to his mouth. "I'm not a very hard man to find. I dare say a quick Internet search would associate me with a number of cutting-edge science technologies."

"Right," Delphine agreed. She offered a smile. "Greg was quite embarrassed to hear Jennifer tell it."

"Young love," crooned Aldous in a manner that sounded less like an exaltation and more akin to a lament. "But we're not here to talk about him. There's a much more interesting subject."

Delphine rubbed at the armrest of the chair in which she reclined, feeling like a student meeting with a professor during office hours. Greg was an interesting topic for her, insomuch that she was unsure at times how to navigate around him. He hovered and observed and attended like a nervous hummingbird, an energy that could send Delphine's nerves jangling, as if somehow his behavior reflected back at her the ulterior motives that put her in the same room as Jennifer Fitzsimmons. But the significant other parsed as insignificant marginalia to Aldous.

Delphine tacked to another question. "We have medical records for Jennifer going back years."

Aldous nodded.

"We knew she was ill before she or her doctors did," Delphine pointed out.

Aldous held up a hand to forestall her next observation. "We didn't know she was ill. We knew changes appeared in her blood work."

"Which means we had her blood tested before her own primary care physician did," Delphine wended to the point. She flipped a hand palm up, fingers splayed. "How?"

"Ah," intoned Aldous. "You want to talk methodology." He eyed her critically. "How would you do it?"

"Obtain the medical records of the subjects?" Delphine clarified. She shook her head. "I don't know. I would have thought, perhaps, by poaching medical records?"

Aldous held up a finger. "But not all people pay frequent or regular visits to a doctor. In a scenario where every subject is given leeway to act on her own will, that's not only unreliable, it's not thorough or standardized."

Delphine's eyes narrowed. "You obtain samples directly?" She played back his words. "Regularly? How?"

"You tell me."

"You're not going to tell me?" fired back Delphine, midway blunting the sharpness of her voice.

"Imagine," Aldous said, giving no indication he'd detected her impatience, "that this is an experiment of your own design. Keep in mind that you don't have an existing model to follow. Your method of data collection must apply to various subjects in various environments, be uniform enough so as to provide comparable data, but also flexible enough to adapt to any changes across the lives of your subjects from conception to death, and standardized enough to eliminate researcher bias. And," Aldous took a breath, "it must be conducted in secret, at the very least done without the knowledge of the subject."

Delphine stared at him. "I don't suppose," she said slowly, "that you hacked all of their phones to record and transmit their activity twenty-four-seven."
Aldous grinned. "Not exactly. But that's not bad thinking for the modern age. What with smart phones, we could plug into their heart rates every minute of the day, couldn't we?"

A tingle sat in Delphine's spine. The weight of her phone dragged heavy in her pocket.

"You have similar medical data on all the other subjects?" Delphine asked.

Aldous shrugged. "Yes."

"They are being compared to Jennifer's?"

"Naturally."

"May I see the data on the others?" Delphine asked.

"It's a lot of data," cautioned Aldous. "But I'll see what I can do."

From Shay [16:37]: Celebratory drinks 2nite?
To Shay [22:03]: I just saw your message. Sorry my reply is so late. I was in a meeting.
From Shay [22:03]: Np. Want to celebrate tmrw?
To Shay [22:04]: To be honest, feeling a little restless.
From Shay [22:05]: Oh? Want to go somewhere?
To Shay [22:05]: I don't know. It is very late.
From Shay [22:06]: Confession: I'm in PJs.
To Shay [22:06]: We could have a night in. I can pick up wine.
From Shay [22:08]: U r suggesting that u come over to my place?
To Shay [22:08]: It would save you the trouble of getting out of your pyjamas to come to mine.
To Shay [22:10]: Do you know of any establishment that won't close as soon as we arrive?
From Shay [22:11]: Who said I would change out of pjs to go to ur place? But ur right. It is late.
From Shay [22:11]: Come over.
To Shay [22:13]: Are you sure?
From Shay [22:13]: 494 Claremont St, #2

The knock at the door stilled the descent of the knife. Shay tilted an ear toward the sound, then carefully set aside the sharp instrument and called, "Coming!" She hastily ran water over her hands, dried them on a dishtowel, and hurried over to the door. Flipping the deadbolt and swinging the door open, she angled herself behind it like a shield.

"Hey," she greeted Delphine. "Come in."

Delphine smiled, her mouth caught between taut and warm, but lingered on the other side of the threshold, statuesque and still.

The question of permission lurked in Delphine's body language. Shay urged her guest inside with a flick of her head. "Come in, come in."

Delphine creaked into movement like an automaton receiving instructions. To her credit, as she stepped inside Delphine fixed her focus on Shay—assessing but not remarking upon Shay's very un-pajama-like attire of blouse and jeans—and greeted her host with a press of her lips first to one cheek, then the other. Only when she stepped back and Shay divested her of the paper bag she toted
did Delphine cast her eyes about the space. Shay identified the course of her inspection in the slight craning of Delphine's neck to scan the vaulted ceiling, the furtive turn of her head left to right.

Shay let her look and carried the bag of wine bottles—plural, to Shay's surprise—into the kitchen to ferret out the bottle opener.

"Make yourself at home," Shay invited. "The couch is comfy—but be careful. The back isn't attached."

"What?" Delphine said, twisting to broadcast her confusion directly at Shay.

Shay grinned. "Sit down. You'll see."

Delphine carried the warning over to the cluster of furniture in the designated living room area where she eyed the couch warily. She nudged the back with her fingertips, too little to budge the weight of it. A second, bolder effort yielded a shift. Delphine glanced at Shay over her shoulder. "This doesn't seem practical or safe."

"It's sturdy," Shay assured her. "Do you want the merlot or the malbec?"

"You choose," Delphine responded in a distracted air. After some consideration she bypassed the couch, apparently deemed too dangerous to test its comfort, and lowered herself into the single seater.

Merlot sounded more familiar to Shay. She worked out the cork and let the contents breathe as she fetched down wine glasses and finished arranging plates, one bearing a limited selection of cheeses and crackers, dried cranberries, and nuts, the other sliced fruits, melon and apple and a halved avocado Shay'd considered that morning to have hit ripe a day or two before. Fishing out forks and butter knives, she conveyed the plates to a tray rack she positioned between the couch and the single seater to serve as side table.

Delphine frowned at the sight, mostly with puzzlement. "What's this?"

"Your dinner, I'm guessing," Shay shot over her shoulder as she retrieved the glasses and wine.

Delphine chuckled. "You had all of this on hand?"

"I did," Shay said as she returned. "Would you like some salad? I could whip one up. I have some hummus and veggies, too."

"No, no," Delphine said quickly, "thank you. This is already more than I was planning."

Shay shook her head as she poured a glass. "Wine for dinner isn't good nutrition."

Delphine leaned over and accepted the glass, smiling to herself. "I ate throughout the day."

"Really?" Shay asked with undisguised doubt. She measured out a cautious portion of wine for herself. "Name everything you ate today."

"Is this a consultation?" Delphine wondered. "Will I be charged?"

"This one's a freebie," Shay promised. She curled up onto the couch under Delphine's dubious, watchful attention.

Delphine sipped at the wine, lowering her glass in front of a smile. She snatched a cracker and bit it decisively in half. Crunching away, she said, "Today I've eaten this cracker."
"Okay, so half a cracker," Shay enumerated.

"I had pizza for lunch."

"Really?"

"Not my idea," Delphine clarified. "But it wasn't bad."

"With toppings?"

"Cheese, sausage, mushrooms, and bell peppers. There was a little side of salad, too."

Shay nodded. "Okay. If that was your last meal, that seems to leave a lot of hours without fuel. When was lunch?"

"Late afternoon. I also had some kind of a—granola bar, maybe? Something like that."

"For breakfast?"

"No, some time after lunch."

"Did you have breakfast?" Shay prodded.

"Coffee. A croissant."

Shay waited a beat. "That's it?"

Delphine snagged a couple craisins and chewed on them thoughtfully—and silently. The muscles around her mouth pulled tight, as if in restraint.

"That's—" Shay began.

"No," Delphine cut her off, lips jerking at the corners. "It wasn't. But your worry is appreciated."

Shay frowned, glared because she'd been played, then simply shook her head, tucking her legs in tight beneath her. "I ask because I care."

"I know," Delphine said, softly, devoid of any teasing, jerking Shay's attention back. When their eyes met, Delphine smiled. "I brought a sandwich for lunch, but because we ordered pizza, I ate it for dinner instead. I might have even had some fruit."

"Good," Shay said, aiming for an indignant huff. It came out more as a put-out capitulation to the truth.

Delphine's smile widened. Adjusting in the chair, leaning back so that the depths engulfed her, Delphine remarked, "Did you know that there is a bathtub in your living room?"

"No, really?" Shay gasped. She grinned. "Why do you think I took this studio?"

"You use it?" Delphine asked, a little incredulous.

"Of course," Shay declared.

Delphine twisted to look at the tub. "It's very . . . exposed."

"You say that like I throw open the shades and climb in when I have guests over."
Delphine turned to her with a sly smile. "No? Here I was thinking you simply enjoyed the public bathing experience." Delphine glanced back at the tub. "Maybe only with a very select public?"

Shay tried to stem a blush—and failed—spectacularly. Heat radiated up her neck and through her cheeks and into the tips of her ears. The general idea of public nudity (in such a scenario) didn't embarrass her. It was the immediate thought of being nude in front of one particular audience, present in her home, eyes at this moment serenely gauging her reaction.

Shay took a deep breath to quell her high color and said, "How'd the week go?"

The wind went out of Delphine's sails. With a cant of her wrist she tipped her glass to look into the swirling wine.

"It was okay," Delphine said, not despondent but far from excited.

"Yeah?" Shay asked softly, taken aback. "You wanna talk about it?"

Delphine shrugged. "I don't know if there's much to talk about."

"Because it's work?" Shay teased lightly.

A smile flickered across Delphine's lips. "Yes, because of that, but also—" She gazed off into a distance. "I think maybe it's just a lot to take in. A lot of changes, a lot of new faces. I don't know what to think about it yet."

Think, Shay noted, not feel. But she nodded in understanding. "It's only the first week."

Delphine nodded. Another smile tugged briefly at her lips. "I think this . . . transfer is supposed to be a reward of some kind, but sitting here right now feels more . . ." Delphine trailed off and left the rest of her thought unvoiced. She smiled at Shay. "Thank you, for inviting me over."

Shay waved a hand. Propping herself up on the end of the couch, she asked, "Is it everything you expected?"

"Your home?" Delphine asked. She conducted an open survey of the space. "I don't know if I expected anything, but it's very . . . you."

"Yeah? What does that mean?"

Delphine flashed an impish smile. "I walked in and thought, 'Ah, yes.'" She peered at Shay. "What would you say? It has the right vibe?"

Shay laughed. "Why does it have to be something I would say? Why can't you use your own words?"

"Because in this case it feels more . . . accurate," Delphine reasoned. "Your home feels like you. Seeing it wasn't . . . a surprise." She paused. "Except for the bathtub. And that you have no television."

Shay gave a little start. "Do you have a TV?"

"Yes," Delphine replied. "You can come over and watch it."

Bottling the laugh that bubbled up, Shay flopped over the end of the couch. "What would we watch?"
"Films?" Delphine suggested. With more confidence, she added, "TED talks. Documentaries."

Brilliance struck Shay. "I should get you some yoga DVDs."

"We won't be watching that if you come over," Delphine pronounced drolly.

"But I can show you the proper form. It would be good for you."

Amusement met her in Delphine's smile. "Probably. For now—" Delphine cast her eyes about. "This is pretty good for me, too." She raised her glass. "Santé."

Chapter End Notes

In the act of porting this story, I have been remiss in not extending thank yous.

Thank you to stalwart fandom friend Mary, who despite not reading this story would continually tell me to write it anyway.

Thank you most especially to jaybear1701, who does read this story and continues to talk to me about it and encourages me to write it despite how it meanders on.

Thank you to the handful of readers over at tumblr who gave this story a chance, despite it being presented in a very rough, even more typolicious form, and to those who have sent comments. Your reactions are delightful. :)

And thank you to those reading this story now. I know the stories I craft aren't exactly high excitement material, but I hope this is an enjoyable read. Thank you for taking a chance on a story that I suspect deters a number of people by simply including Shay Davydov. I have a soft spot for her character in that I think canon really could have done a lot with her and fell far short. This story was partly born out of wanting to explore the potential I saw and I hope some of that is imparted.

Thank you. :)

Though not a hospital or clinic in an official capacity, the DYAD facilities staffed an array of nurses, technicians, and doctors, a panoply of skilled human resources funneled toward Jennifer's care. Too many bodies. The flurry of activity rendered Delphine feeling somewhat superfluous. As lead, Dr. Estrada determined which treatment regimens they would pursue, using which particular medication at what dosages for what lengths of intervals. His was the face and voice that engaged with Jennifer and laid out their plans, drawing her in as accomplice and collaborator.

From the outside, it was impressive. But the outside wasn't the vantage Delphine had bargained for.

It wasn't that Delphine wasn't learning—or contributing. But the days, as with the myriad people streaming in and out, seemed to move around her. She wasn't being taught or supervised and she wasn't expected to learn, as during her residency trailing an attending physician, so she wasn't being pushed forward in interaction, and, though she and Dr. Estrada sat down to discuss matters, Delphine wasn't just a consultant who took time out of other duties to provide an opinion.

Delphine was just . . . there.

She hovered, watched, observed. Not just Jennifer, but everyone.

She witnessed the efficiency of the nurses and technicians, which ones conducted their duties with mum and somber directness, which ones peppered Jennifer with small talk and wore cheeriness like a print on their otherwise bland scrubs, which ones joked, which ones used "hun" or "sweetie," gave reassuring pats, which ones had keen eyes and clever hands adept at drawing blood with ease.

She noted the paternal tone Dr. Estrada assumed with Jennifer, the cautious terms that couched prognoses and the hope conveyed with a faint smile, the ultimate goal of which Delphine discerned to be not clarity or transparency, but instilling ease. At times Dr. Estrada didn't provide much information to his patient, but he spoke enough as if he were.

If Jennifer noticed, she didn't comment. Nor did Greg. Delphine took notice of Greg. Maybe out of some degree of empathy. He, too, lingered on the fringe of events, a near-constant presence. He jumped to be of service or help, all determined eagerness to act as caretaker, but his wide-eyed drifting marked him as inexperienced and without a clue.

He was quiet. He didn't ask questions. He didn't make objections. He didn't weigh in on any discussions between them and Jennifer, unless Jennifer explicitly addressed him, and even then he was quick to defer to her. He never got in anyone's way. Greg was just . . . there. Waiting for Jennifer to need him.

Jennifer did need him. Greg's was the only familiar face in a sea of strangers. She was scared, even if she didn't show it. Not to them. She had a smile most days for most everyone. And a cough that surfaced regularly.

She was also beautiful.

It might have been a strange thought but it struck Delphine as regularly as the frequency she beheld Jennifer. Anything could have gotten lost or corrupted in the cloning process, but Jennifer Fitzsimmons was a beautiful woman, who'd been healthy and strong for most of her life.

As most of the clones were.
It was incredible. The data Aldous provided to Delphine was robust—and fascinating. These women had defied odds against complications of pregnancy, infancy, and adolescence. Their health histories attested to an average of quality, conscientious health care, unsurprising when Delphine considered that in most, if not all, cases, the clones' surrogate mothers had the means to access fertility treatment.

When Delphine had requested the information of Aldous, she imagined seeing the clones' health histories would reveal portraits she could contemplate side-by-side in her mind. But the problem became apparent quickly. The clones weren't identical works of art done up in varying colors and different brushstrokes. No. Their shared genetic base served rather like blank whole cloth from which every canvas had been cut and stretched upon individual frames, upon which completely different artists from different schools had inscribed studies of different subjects.

Their vaccinations varied. Their illnesses varied. Their injuries varied. Procedures. Medications. Treatments. Ailments. Each one of them carried immune systems strewn with different antibodies and resistances.

Jennifer could very well be an isolated case.

She'd taken performance-enhancing drugs, buried far back in history, maybe when she was still a teenager.

Some of the others partook of far more than that.

In Delphine's mind, having only statistics and trends by which to identify and differentiate them, they all looked like Jennifer—but beneath the surface, they were remarkably unique unto themselves.

Unfortunately an innocuous insight. It didn't help Jennifer.

The rounds of blood test results following the implementation of immunosuppressants hammered home their cluelessness. The immunosuppressants barely affected the uptick in the spread of the polyps. Sitting in Dr. Estrada's office, she and Dr. Estrada frowned over the results. Neither had to say a word.

They'd thought there would have been much more of a bump.

That same day Dr. Estrada explained the situation to Jennifer.

Delphine listened in surprise. They hadn't discussed telling Jennifer.

Delphine had assumed they were going to hide it.

She'd gotten used to hiding information.

"You look like one of my kids when they get a bad score on a test they studied really hard for or a paper they spent a long time writing."

Delphine gave a start when she realized the droll voice of Jennifer was addressing her. "Excuse me?"

"You know," Jennifer said slowly, with the patience of an educator, "you tried really hard and you thought it turned out well, but it wasn't good enough."

Dr. Estrada cleared his throat delicately. "We aren't done trying yet, Jennifer."

Jennifer kept her eyes on Delphine. When she turned away, at a small touch upon her forearm from Greg, who looked at no one and said nothing, a smile flitted across her lips.
A vein of bitterness bled and lingered in the lines of tension around her mouth.

In every smile afterward, Delphine found herself looking for it.

Setting her tablet upon her lap, Delphine reached up to rub and squeeze at her bad shoulder, expression contemplative rather than marred by the strain and twitches triggered by thorny encounters with knots and twinges.

"What about chronic pain?" Delphine asked.

"What about chronic pain?" Shay echoed, tilting her book forward to see Delphine better where the scientist curled into the single seat. Not unlike a cat. Shay had dated girls with cats. Cats were unpredictable. Shay could never gauge if a cat would so much as approach her or ignore her existence forever, no matter or despite what she did, and their judgement and rejection always felt like a subtle signal to their owners of Shay's worth. Dogs Shay understood, from the happy ones to the yappy ones. But cats—cats had their own agenda.

Not that Delphine was a feline, for all that sometimes Shay did wonder if Delphine had an agenda, or that someday it might occur to her that she and Shay were really very, very different people whose spheres of influence and interests circumscribed almost no overlap and who had they ever been fooling behaving otherwise? Maybe the profounder mystery was that they did get along, in a general, comfortable way. Like now. Simply occupying the same room. Without interacting.

The evening hadn't begun with that plan. They hadn't even had plans—that Shay knew about. She'd settled down to a quiet night with Henry DeTamble and Clare Abshire when a knock at the door startled her. Shay had lain frozen, clutching her thriftstore novel, for long enough that a second report issued softly. Her would-be intruder turned out to be a friendly-faced Delphine, wearing a smile a smidgen uncertain and bearing a selection of delectable lavish desserts that "demanded to be shared. If you want."

The truth was that Shay didn't know what she wanted, or precisely how she felt about Delphine popping in unannounced (and that she hadn't foreseen that this was an actual possibility once Delphine acquired her address—an uncalculated misread on Shay's part), but she'd been raised with manners enough to recognize (and appreciate) a sweet gesture when she saw one, so she couldn't very well have closed the door on Delphine's face, could she?

No. Obviously not.

But ten minutes after they'd spread out the array, procured utensils and beverages, and sat down, the notification arrived. Delphine glanced fleetingly at her cell phone screen, only to look again, frown forming, fingers tapping and sweeping across the touch surface, until she was driven to announce, "I'm sorry, I need to look at this."

Sitting across the table from Delphine, rather than beside her according to the usual arrangement of chairs, Shay waved her ganache-smeared fork. "Of course, go ahead."

Half a minute endured squinting at the screen produced, to Shay's amazement, a tablet from the messenger bag Delphine had slid onto the far end of the table. The higher screen resolution commanded ten unwavering minutes of Delphine's attention, during which Shay whittled down a number of decadent confections to halves—Delphine's untouched share.

The doctor read with a furrow between her eyes. The indentation, lingering unaltered, made Shay's
fingers twitch to smooth it. After a time—and when she was certain Delphine displayed no indications of notice—Shay simply studied Delphine, struck with the impression that this was the first time she was seeing Delphine "work." (Probability placed the odds in favor of Delphine’s preoccupation being work-related. Shay wasn’t sure what time it was in France, but she was willing to bet it was an inconvenient hour for any family or friends to reach out unless it was an emergency, in which case Delphine was reacting with remarkable aplomb. Besides, Shay only knew Delphine to ever be arrested by one thing: her job.) It was a bit discomfiting, in that Shay was sitting so physically close to Delphine, but whatever news or task that consumed her friend was so unknown and unknowable that it might as well have been an undertaking on Mars. (Which reminded her: Her brother had mentioned she should read Packing for Mars. He had more taste for general non-fiction than she did.) Not that Shay harbored any illusions that she would understand Delphine’s work even if she were allowed to read over Delphine’s shoulder. Yet it could be jolting to think that Delphine was well acquainted with Shay’s trade, that the doctor had first-hand experience of what passed between Shay and a client, that whenever Shay related an account of work Delphine had points of reference to contextualize the story. Whereas Shay had no idea what Delphine in a laboratory was like, if she was the type to smile at colleagues or was a stern face among the banks of microscopes (as Shay imagined surrounded Delphine throughout the day).

The Delphine she witnessed now was all concentrated seriousness.

"Hey," Shay broke in softly. Delphine's head whipped up. "Do you want any more?"

Delphine glanced at the array of treats. With a sigh her shoulders drooped. "I'm sorry. I feel like a bad host—not that this is my home, it's your home, and I came over unin—"

Shay held up a hand. "It's okay. It's okay. I get it. I was just asking because if you don't want any more right now, I can pack it up and put it in the fridge for later."

Instead of answering, Delphine lowered the tablet, reaching with her free hand with the probable intent to assist, but Shay waved her off.

"I got it, don't worry. I'm the actual host here, remember? But I think we should move the party over there," said Shay with a jerk of her head to indicate the living room area behind Delphine, "where it's more comfortable."

Delphine hesitated. "I can go."

Shay shrugged. "I'm not going to stop you if that's what you want, but you're free to stay and . . . hang out. I just plan on reading—comfortably."

Delphine mulled on it. "If you don't mind."

"I don't mind," Shay assured her.

For a second longer Delphine looked undecided. Then she moved to gather up the cakes and pastries and together they packed up the remainder of the dessert.

"Do you have room in your refrigerator?" Delphine asked with a hint of hesitation.

Shay laughed. "I'll make room."

Shay remained unsure of Delphine’s decision up to the moment she closed the refrigerator door and turned around to discover Delphine had eschewed the couch once again by claiming the single seater. Her loss. Suppressing a smile, Shay nonchalantly reclaimed her novel from the couch cushions and resumed the position she'd taken up earlier that evening stretched out on the couch.
The DeTambles welcomed Shay back without insult and she was close to completing the following chapter when Delphine posed her question. A question that wasn't any clearer to Delphine herself, judging by the withdrawn consideration of her expression. Delphine sat quiet, searching.

"I'm not sure what I mean," Delphine admitted. "But you—you know people with chronic pain."

Shay nodded.

"So how do you . . ." Delphine frowned. "How do you help them?"

"What do you mean?" Shay asked.

"I mean . . . I mean you can't make the pain go away. You can only help them . . . manage it."

Shay nodded.

"Does that—does that bother you?"

"Not as much as the pain will always bother them," Shay said, sadly. "My job is the easy part in that situation. I do what I can, when I can, but the sad truth is that it also depends on the time and the expense someone can afford to give to that portion of their health. For me, it's—it's my job."

Delphine eyed her. "Do you wish you could do more?"

Shay retreated into a momentary bubble of silence. "I don't know."

Delphine cocked her head, attentive, curious.

Shay pushed herself up into a sitting position. "It's like . . . it's like, yeah, you wish you could help everyone, but it's—it's not feasible to devote all your time and energy toward one person. Or even worrying about one person. And I think—in a situation when pain is the everyday reality and maybe always will be—if it turns out you can't help them, it—it takes a toll. It's hard if you can't let go. And it is my job. If I get hung up on one person, then maybe I can't help other people, maybe not to the best of my abilities. Not to mention take care of myself. You know?"

"And if your job was one person, or a small group of people?"

"I want—I want to think I could?" Shay wondered, in all honesty. "But I can't say for sure how I would handle it in the long run." Shay turned the scenario over in her mind. "I would try."

Delphine gazed down thoughtfully. "And if you knew there was a cure and that you were equipped to pursue it? Would you devote yourself to that?"

"Do I know I can find a cure for sure?"

Delphine shook her head. "Only that it exists and that you are capable of looking for it."

Shay considered Delphine. "Is that what you do?"

Delphine's features maintained a careful blank. A small smile cracked the exterior. "Did you admit to being selfish?"

"Whoa, whoa," Shay said, holding up both hands. "I have never claimed to be selfless."

Delphine's eyes narrowed at the corners, as if bringing Shay into focus through a lense. "You're right."
"About which part?" Shay asked.

Delphine smiled and picked up her tablet.

* 

At one of their semi-regular debriefings—or so Delphine thought of them—Delphine posed to Aldous: "What if this isn't something we can cure? What if it's an ailment that we can suppress but that would require long-term provision and treatment?"

From behind his desk, Aldous's gaze upon Delphine went aslant with a tilt of his head, his mouth entertaining a little bemused smile. "Throwing in the towel so soon?"

Delphine shook her head. "I'm only asking hypothetically."

"Are you wondering if we would abandon Jennifer if that turned out to be the case?" Aldous asked.

Delphine mustered past hesitation. "Yes."

Aldous rubbed his lips with a finger. "What makes you think that, Delphine? Is it the expense you have in mind? Do you think we have a ceiling on how much we're willing to invest in them? That there is a line that we'll draw?"

The muscles in Delphine's face pinched minutely. "But you have drawn a line. Not monetarily, but in taking direct involvement. Jennifer has been an exception, not a rule. Your interactions with the subjects have always been discreet—such prolonged contact for what could be the rest of her life risks exposure. That's to say that depending on the type of treatment, we may need to keep Jennifer close, which would require all sorts of arrangements."

Aldous listened with cultivated indifference. Preceding his reply, he took a short, sharp breath. "You assume a lot."

Delphine settled into the chair. "Tell me where I was wrong."

"Where do you think you were wrong?"

This was a funny thing with Aldous. Delphine knew him as a man primed to lecture, eager even to impart knowledge, but in these matters Aldous played at reticent. A disinclination to reveal too much about Project Leda to her, perhaps. Or a test. Or a lesson.

Delphine wet her lips. "There's the matter of how we have such up-to-date medical records for the subjects when, as far as I know, they've never set foot inside a DYAD facility."

Aldous smiled. "The last time you brought this up, I asked you how you would design the experiment model."

Delphine frowned. "Are we more directly involved in their lives than the subjects are aware of?" The logistics stymied her mind. "But—"

"What's the hurdle in your process?" Aldous questioned.

"The degree of medical information we possess suggests to me that it must have been gathered by medical personnel, but I cannot imagine—"
Aldous waited, then prompted, "Imagine what?"

"How medical personnel could get so close to the subjects without them knowing. How they had access. And time." She met Aldous's considering eyes. "To me it makes no sense to have dedicated resources when assets as trained as medical personnel would be wasted in some kind of, what would we call this, observer capacity? Yet—" Delphine shook her head. "The subjects have freedom of movement? But you know where they are. They are in too many countries for you to have access to agencies that—" Delphine cut herself off. "Even then, why would governments have an interest in them? DYAD has no direct government affiliations. Contractual work, but the scope of this is beyond one nation." Delphine poked at her lips. "The point is that this has been conducted in secret."

Aldous chuckled. "You're thinking backwards, Delphine, rather than forward. You're trying to see the pattern that we've made rather than devise the paths that would have to be forged."

Every ridiculous espionage film she'd had the mischance to see leapt to her mind, so that all Delphine could concoct were spies and hidden cameras and bugs and trackers, a network feeding information back to the hub through wires and phone calls and signals. Is that how Delphine would do it? Yet how many more resources would have to be dedicated to sifting through the ocean of data that would flood in? Lifetimes would have to be spent distilling lifetimes into relevant, salient points.

Was that what Aldous was doing? Had he already committed himself to the prospect that a study of the entirety of the subjects' lives would comprise his?

Was that what Delphine was doing?

Delphine swallowed. "So you intend to help Jennifer, for however long it might take?"

Aldous smiled. "Do you, Delphine? Is that a prospect that appeals to you?"

Delphine didn't reply. For if DYAD's answer to that question was yes, she more than suspected she'd already agreed to the same.

For the duration of Jennifer's life or her own—whichever happened to end first.
Chapter 13

Perched on the edge of the examination table, possibly attempting to hypnotize herself with the sway of her dangling feet, Jennifer raised her head when the door opened. It took a second for recognition to set in. "Dr. Cormier. The nurse hasn't been in to see me yet."

Delphine smiled on her way to the sink. "Actually, you get only me today." She cast an eye about the room. "Did Greg step out?"

Jennifer smiled. "You get only me today." Her eyes studied Delphine. "Is there something special on the agenda?"

Delphine shook her head as she washed her hands. "No. Unless you count that we are unexpectedly understaffed today. Someone called out sick, someone else is dealing with car trouble, and there's work enough to stretch everyone thin. So I said I would be glad to step in."

Jennifer's expression took on a shade of skeptical with a cast of wariness.

"I am trained," Delphine assured her.

"But are you practiced?" Jennifer asked, sitting back and folding her hands in her lap. Her tone was neutral enough to give Delphine pause.

Delphine appraised Jennifer, gauging. She'd watched this woman interact with staff at myriad levels, even while contact between themselves had remained limited. Strict professionalism was always an option in any given situation.

But how often did one interact with a genuine human clone?

"There's no time like the present to start practicing," Delphine said lightly. "Don't they say that practice makes perfect?"

Jennifer tilted her head back and groaned theatrically. "Uuuuuugh. The worst part is that I've said that all the time."

Delphine indulged in a little chuckle as she stepped close and tugged up Jennifer's sleeve. "As a . . . coach, correct?"

Jennifer nodded. "I coach—I coached swim."

"And you are a teacher, as well?" Delphine asked as she wound the blood pressure cuff around Jennifer's bicep.

"Yeah. Social studies. History."

Delphine smiled through the pleasant surprise. "Not my best subjects."

Jennifer grinned. "No? Was it all the dates?"

"No, actually," Delphine said as she grasped the stethoscope from around her neck and fit the eartips into her ears. "It turns out I have no trouble retaining medical history, but the rise and fall of nations held little interest for me."

"Those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it," Jennifer murmured.
Delphine's eyebrows rose, but together they fell into silence as Delphine inflated the cuff and concentrated on taking measurements. Afterward she ran through a battery of quick diagnostics, pulse and temperature, a check of Jennifer's lymph nodes (inflamed) and her respiration (restricted breaths, aqueous rattling, possibly mucous).

Delphine tucked her dismay behind a wall of stoniness.

Swabbing Jennifer's arm and readying the needle, Delphine asked softly, "How did you and Greg meet?"

"At a—" Jennifer sucked in a breath as the needle slid in and blew it out slowly. "At a swim meet." Jennifer glanced down at Delphine's handiwork. "That wasn't . . . so bad."

Delphine smiled to herself. "At a swim meet? Were you and he competing?"

"Oh, no, no." Jennifer laughed. "This was a high school meet. Greg's a conditioning coach. He works mainly at the collegiate level, so he happened to be there with a scout looking for potential recruits."

"And . . . ?" Delphine prompted as she swapped out vials.

"They were interested in one of my kids. They approached us and," Jennifer drawled, "somehow he and I got to talking . . . ."

Delphine nodded. "And the rest is . . . history?"

Jennifer smiled, all canines, eyes twinkling at Delphine in acknowledgment of her shameless pun. "Yeah." She breathed out in a rush. "He's been great. About all of this. He was the one who found you guys."

Delphine nodded. "You mentioned." Delphine paused, then asked, "How did he find us?"

Jennifer shook her head. "I don't know. Maybe my doctor suggested it? Maybe he found you through Google? I didn't really ask him." A frown marred Jennifer's features. "Is it weird that I didn't ask? Should I have asked? It's like it didn't even cross my mind. I guess at the time I was just so—grateful that someone—someone might be able to help."

A stone lodged in Delphine's chest.

Were they helping Jennifer? Did they want to help?

They were all in this for the long haul, of that Delphine was now certain, but while a part of her believed that, yes, DYAD wanted to help Jennifer out of altruism and decency, the part that had reviewed a bulk of medical profiles, that was still trying to deduce the system implemented to surveil the subjects, that knew how easily and concisely these women could be reduced to sequences of numbers, recognized how any "help" could be incidental in the pursuit of a general study.

Of course, it didn't have to be just one or the other.

Her lack of reply prompted Jennifer to say, lightly, "I kinda wish he could have found some place closer to home."

Delphine raised her eyes to catch wistfulness sweep across Jennifer's expression.

"It was hard to have to leave so—abruptly," Jennifer said, gaze directed at the floor.
"Your students must miss you," Delphine said softly.

"I miss them," Jennifer said plainly, but she smiled. "They're so sweet. They send me letters and cards. My old class put together a care package—with all this candy I can't eat. Greg seems to appreciate it, though. There's another teacher who keeps me posted and I get updates and news from the swim team captain, so I know how they're all doing. Everyone tells me that they can't wait for me to come back..." She breathed out, cleared her throat against a cough. "I can't wait, either."

Delphine nodded. But she said nothing.

There were no promises anyone could make that Jennifer would ever return home.

* *

"Do you think of this place as your home?"

"You mean Toronto?" Shay asked.

Delphine nodded.

"Do you?" Shay flipped the interrogation.

Delphine tapped the tabletop absently, thinking face donned. At last she shook her head. "No."

"Feeling homesick?" Shay prodded gently.

Delphine shook her head. "No." She turned her focus on Shay. "Do you get homesick?"

"For the prairies?" Shay sighed. "Not really. The things I miss about it have more to do with family or friends, not really the place. This may sound weird, but if there's a place I miss, it's Barcelona."

Delphine crossed her arms atop the table. "What is it about you and Barcelona? Did you live there?"

Shay shook her head. "Only visited."

Delphine weighed her answer. "That must have been some visit."

Shay smiled.

"Why didn't you stay?" Delphine asked. "Or move to Barcelona instead of Toronto?"

Shay blended a pout and a smile. "Sometimes I ask myself the same thing. But the timing was all off. And when I left Barcelona, I was ready to get away from it. It took some time to feel like I wanted to go back."

Delphine put her in the crosshairs of a squint. "What?"

Shay spread her hands.

"No, no," Delphine said, holding up a hand. "That—that doesn't make sense. Something is missing."

Shay mimed a gasp, eyes wide. "You mean you know I'm not telling you the whole story?" She grinned. "It's shocking, isn't it?"

Delphine curled her fingers so that only her index finger remained extended to admonish Shay. "That's not fair. There are things I cannot tell you, by law, according to a binding contract. This—"
what you're doing—is deliberately doling out crumbs and withholding the rest of the story."

"Your English is so good," Shay remarked.

Shay believed that Delphine almost very nearly rolled her eyes. "You're not even giving me the
courtesy of denying my accusations."

"Because you're right," Shay said breezily. "Like your contract, there's nothing to deny."

Delphine's features cycled through surprise, incredulity, and then something bordering affront.
Before Shay could parse it, Delphine whipped her head to the side, putting herself in profile. Her jaw
flexed. "That is annoying."

Shay giggled. "That's it?"

Delphine clamped down on a knuckle with her teeth, released it. "It wouldn't be fair to ask for more.
Right?"

Shay smiled. By way of confirmation, she asked, "Do you miss France?"

The language. I miss hearing it."

"And the bread," suggested Shay.

"Always," vouched Delphine.

"Do you plan to go back?"

"You mean relocate?"

Shay nodded.

Delphine shrugged. "I always knew I was willing to go wherever my work took me. With the
possible exception of China. That was the one prospect that scared me."

Shay's eyebrows inquired for more. "Why would China scare you?"

Delphine smiled crookedly. "I don't have much confidence in my ability to learn Mandarin."

Shay laughed.

"Whereas my English," Delphine continued, "which some inform me is so good, would serve me
well in most other places at the cutting edge of research."

"Like Toronto."

Delphine nodded. "Like Toronto."

Shay played back her words. "Toronto's at the cutting edge of research?"

"You think it shouldn't be?"

"I have no idea," Shay said. "I'm genuinely asking."

"Where I am, yes," Delphine said.
"So," Shay considered slowly, "home is where the science is."

Delphine laughed. "Yes. I guess so." She eyed Shay. "Where is home for you?" Her gaze turned light with teasing. "Barcelona?"

Shay's chin dimpled with thought. "There was a very short window of time I thought maybe it could have been."

Delphine let her curiosity show. But she didn't ask. Not yet.

"What kind of injury was it?"

Alone with Jennifer on one of the random days she'd coopted nurse duty—"For practice," she told Jennifer—and poised to shine a light into her patient's eyes, Delphine lowered the penlight with puzzlement. "Excuse me?"

"I noticed that you, um," Jennifer faltered, clearing her throat. "You limp. A little. It's your left side?"

Delphine stood straighter. After a moment, she said, "Is it obvious?"

"I don't know if it's obvious," Jennifer said quickly, "but I watch you walk across the room a lot." Jennifer made a face. "Sorry. That sounds kind of creepy."

Delphine smiled, raising the penlight to eye-line height. "No more creepy than 'I'm here for your blood.'"

Jennifer almost laughed, but flinched and squinted under the beam.

"You know," Jennifer said, "water exercises are a great low-impact way to rebuild muscle and range of motion. I don't mean swimming—though you could do that, too—but doing exercises like walking or jumping jacks in an environment like a pool. I didn't teach those types of classes, but sometimes I'd see groups at community pools. You could probably find something like that around here."

Listening, even as she concentrated on the feel of lymph nodes beneath her fingertips, Delphine smiled, the expression feeling almost manic stretched across her face by the time Jennifer finished her pitch. Studying Delphine in close proximity, Jennifer added lamely, "Just a suggestion."

"I'm sorry," Delphine said in a rush of reassurance as she withdrew. "I'm not—it's a good suggestion, thank you. It's just that hearing you say that reminded me of . . . a friend. She tells me to do yoga."

"Yoga's great, too," Jennifer added her endorsement, ebullience returning. "Doing it regularly will keep your muscles warm, loose, and flexible."

"Forgive me," Delphine replied lightly, "but I have to pretend you didn't tell me that. I believe you, it's just that I don't know if I can give in now that I've held out for so long."

Jennifer smiled, but uncertainly in confusion. "So you're gonna let your ego get in the way of your health and fitness? As a doctor, I would have thought you would be open to advice like that."

"I'm going to tell you a secret," Delphine said in a low, conspiratorial tone. "Doctors are very stubborn and are possibly the hardest to convince."

Jennifer's eyes narrowed in speculation. "I don't know if that's a secret you should share with your
patients if you want them to obey your orders."

"See, that's good advice," Delphine agreed brightly. "But now you have to help me by keeping this between you and me."

"I guess I could do that," Jennifer conceded, but chidingly, as if Delphine were a student who'd wrangled her teacher's confidence to hide a negligible misdeed. "But yoga really is a great option. I swim—I swam a lot and frequently had shoulder problems—you know, with my rotator cuff. Adding yoga to my routine actually really helped."

"I have to ask: When did you do yoga?"

"Like when did I start or like at what time of day?"

"What time of day."

"In the morning."

"Daily?"

"Yes."

"What time did classes start?"

"Well, first bell is at seven forty-five."

Delphine did some quick calculations with estimated average morning preparation times. She shook her head. "Ah. No. That's not for me."

"You don't have to do it in the morning if you're not a morning person. As long as you can set aside some time each day, you can do it."

Delphine nodded along, but said, "You and my friend must definitely never meet."

"Aw," whined Jennifer, "why not? She sounds wonderful."

"Exactly," Delphine said. "She sounds wonderful to you because the two of you probably think alike. Where would that leave me?"

"Doing yoga," Jennifer deadpanned.

Delphine chuckled. "Yes. You, me, Greg, and my friend—we would all be doing yoga together."

"Patch me up and it's a deal," Jennifer said.

Delphine's jaw locked and she kept her gaze cast down. After a time she nodded. "Okay. Deal."

Jennifer smirked. It suffered only a little from the gauntness of her cheeks and the tremble of weakness plaguing her muscles. "You better start shopping for a yoga mat and some yoga pants. This chemotherapy is gonna do it, right?"

Delphine hesitated before squarely meeting Jennifer's eyes. "I hope so."

She did.

Jennifer looked right through her.
For the first time Delphine recognized that both of them harbored doubts far greater than their hopes—and in that moment Delphine let Jennifer know it.

"Are your patients—your clients—faceless to you?" Delphine asked into her hand. Her palm lay over her mouth, even as it served to prop up her head.

She and Shay were meeting more sporadically. Delphine was busy. And more troubled. Enough that Delphine had reached out to Shay on a Wednesday.

"What do you mean? I meet my clients face-to-face all the time," Shay said, infusing a jocular note into her voice. "It usually makes the touching part easier for everyone."

Delphine frowned behind her hand. Shay could discern the contortion from the way her eyebrows dipped. So jokes weren't the order of the evening.

"Do you get to know all your clients?" asked Delphine. "That is, using myself as an example, we talked quite a bit before we—before we became friends."

"Not all of my clients," Shay said. "Probably not even most of them. Some don't like to talk. Some fall asleep. Some only come in once or twice." She considered. "I get to know their injuries. Their discomforts. Where they hold tension in their bodies. Stuff like that."

Delphine nodded, eyes unfocused on some indeterminate distance. "Yes. That's how it is."

Shay wanted to ask—to pry—but she knew that whatever was bothering Delphine would be better volunteered. Delphine's gaze darted over and found Shay's eyes. Picking out the colors in Delphine's irises, Shay felt perched on a bubble threatening to burst.

Delphine smiled, eyes crinkling at the corners. "So I am an exception, rather than a rule?"

Shay laughed. "Don't even try to say that like you didn't already know it."

Delphine rolled her head to rest at an angle, eyes leisurely picking over Shay's features. "But I didn't know. Not expressly."

"Yeah, well," Shay muttered, sipping at her drink, skirting Delphine's eyes, "don't let it go to your head."

Delphine freed her mouth from the prison of her hand and breathed in deeply, mouth briefly bowing thoughtfully. "I'm glad I was."

Shay fended off an incipient smile with a shake of her head.

She was glad, too.

Most of the time.

"You wanna talk about it?" Shay offered, unable to resist the prick of her curiosity.

Delphine breathed out heavily and glanced away. "Do you ever feel like you're not given a choice? That whether you want to or not, a situation is pulling you in one direction?"

Shay frowned. "To do what?"
"Like getting to know someone."

One specific, immediate person leapt to mind. But Delphine was the result of Shay's own prerogative. Shay had let her attraction lead and though she'd tried to backpedal and maintain distance, she was no match for the honed inquisitiveness of a trained scientist.

"Do you not want to get to know them?" Shay asked.

Silence buffered Delphine's slow-coming reply. "I think it might be . . . better? If we didn't get to know each other. Easier, maybe? But I think we are gaining glimpses, whether we want to or not."

"You don't want to?"

Conflict pulled at Delphine's features. "I don't know."

"Do you not get along?"

"That's not it."

Hesitation momentarily checked Shay's next question. "Are you . . . attracted to this person?"

Delphine turned to stare at her fully. Then she loosed a bark of laughter. "No! That's not—no." She smiled to herself, then smothered a round of after-giggles. "No. No."

"Okay," Shay amended with a hint of apology, "so in-office, doctor-patient romance is not the issue."

Her words seemed to strike a deeper chord of amusement, stretching Delphine's smile wider. Delphine eyed her speculatively. "Would you pursue someone in those circumstances?"

"I . . . have not," Shay said diplomatically. "I mean in the past, a workplace romance meant fraternization, and I certainly would not have engaged in anything that so clearly violated regulations." She punctuated her flippancy with upturned palms. "Just as I technically wasn't gay any of those years."

Delphine nodded along gamely but said, "Explain that last part?"

"Don't Ask, Don't Tell?"

"Ah, yes." Delphine raised an eyebrow. "And now?"

"Do you think I'd be using Sapphire if I was hooking up through my job?"

Delphine smiled. "That wasn't my question."

Shay sighed. "If only I were so lucky that I had a parade of cute, available lesbians waltzing through my door." She met Delphine's eyes. "Then we'd see."

"And if I were in a position to refer available women to you, I would," Delphine said.

"So you could see what I would do?"

"To make life easier for you," Delphine declared, putting on injury. "But, since you mentioned it, that would be interesting to see as well."

"See, I'm learning," Shay said. "Experiments make everything more interesting and worthwhile."
Delphine reacted with less enthusiasm than Shay predicted. "In some cases, yes."
Delphine swept into the examination room, absorbed in the chart she held in hand, looked up, and stopped. Jennifer and Greg were present where she expected, but so was a tripod topped by a camcorder aimed in Jennifer's direction.

"Am I interrupting?" Delphine asked.

"No, you're fine, Dr. Cormier," Jennifer assured her. She sucked in a breath, shaking her head against the cough she trapped in her throat. "It's not on."

Delphine approached the pair and the set up with the wariness of encountering a wild animal. "You're recording something?"

"I keep a video diary," Jennifer said, a mite sheepish. "I have since—since we found the polyps. A counselor told me that it might help me . . . cope."

"I wasn't aware that you were seeing a counselor," Delphine said gently.

"Oh, I'm not. Not now. This was back in the States."

"I think it, um, helps, though, to keep doing it," Greg said, scratching at the back of his neck. "It's like a, uh, outlet."

Jennifer smiled at Greg, though her mouth beneath the cannula was tight at the corners. "We lugged it along today. Do you want to say hi, Dr. Cormier? We can turn it on."

Delphine shook her head. "No, thank you, that's okay. Is it just for you?"

Jennifer nodded. "It's . . . easier to be honest that way."

Greg shoved his hands into his pockets and glanced over his shoulder. Delphine noted the discomfort in his posture.

Perhaps his unease stemmed from having heard Jennifer vent choice words concerning Delphine and the staff. It wouldn't have shocked Delphine.

"I'm, uh, gonna take all this stuff out to the car, okay, babe?" Greg muttered. He leaned over Jennifer and pressed a kiss to her temple. He glanced at Delphine, as if to convey he was giving them privacy, and summarily gathered the tripod up and marched out.

They both remained looking after him for a second, then Delphine turned to Jennifer with a smile. "I wanted to see how you're feeling. Sorry to make you give another account if you've already taken the trouble."

Jennifer waved her off. "The camera doesn't care."

Delphine clutched the chart to her chest and nodded. She supposed it didn't.

One wall of Aldous's office was entirely glass. The transparency afforded Delphine a view of the large television monitor in the corner as she passed by the reception desk, early to her appointment.
On display in almost larger-than-life dimensions was Jennifer. She looked directly out of the monitor, framed close and intimately, lips moving in speech, in consternation, in thought, and settling still in turns.

Every now and again another figure dropped in and out of frame.

Greg.

Delphine stood at the door of Aldous's office and stared.

"You're free to go in," Aldous's secretary startled her after some time. Delphine jerked around, wearing some sort of expression that raised the assistant's eyebrows. "He's expecting you."

Yes. He'd known she was coming, set to arrive punctually, if not early.

Delphine leaned into the door, gathered herself, and pushed her way inside. The screen blinked off and Aldous turned to her with a smile.

"Hello, Delphine."

Delphine stood beside one of the chairs before his desk and gripped the back for balance. "Aldous."

They both upheld fronts of silence. Aldous was clearly in no hurry.

Delphine swallowed. "How did you get the video?"

"What video?"

"The video you were just watching. Jennifer's video diary."

"So you know about that," Aldous remarked.

"How do you?" retorted Delphine.

Aldous spread his hands. "Your questions keep circling back to the same theme, Delphine."

Delphine moved to stand directly behind the chair and gripped the back with both hands. There was only one party Delphine knew that might bridge the video and Aldous. "I can see only one connection."

Aldous prompted her with a hand.

"Greg."

Confirmation lit Aldous's expression, a sort of smug approval. It bowed Delphine's head beneath the wave of realizations that hit her.

"Merde," she breathed.

Greg was the avenue of access. He was feeding Aldous information. And Aldous was doing the same?

"You reached out to Greg. He didn't reach out to you. He didn't find you. You found him. " Jennifer hadn't asked. It hadn't mattered to her. Nor, apparently, to Greg.

"You're only scratching the surface, Delphine," chided Aldous. Delphine lifted her head. "You have
"How deep?" Delphine said. "Are you saying that your connection with Greg goes further back? Since when? Since—" She pulled up short. Aldous's gaze was steady. "He's a plant." Delphine processed a cascade of implications. "How? I thought you said that the subjects have freedom of choice."

"They do," Aldous said. "Jennifer was free to go where she wanted, live how she wanted, socialize how she wanted. She chose Greg. Do you think we could have forced cohabitation on her?" Aldous tapped at his lips. "Though I have to say that this was one of the great hurdles of uncertainty that we faced as the subjects continued to age and prosper."

"And the solution was, what? Throw someone in their path and see if they take?"

Aldous smiled. "Remarkably simple, wouldn't you say? Yet rewardingly effective."

"But the security risks," Delphine pointed out. "How could you know that these—these—"

"Monitors," supplied Aldous.

"Monitors," Delphine enunciated carefully. She moistened her lips and checked her racing adrenaline. "How could you know that these monitors wouldn't betray the truth to the subjects?"

"What truth?"

"The nature of the subjects. That they're clones, an engineered experiment."

Aldous cocked his head, fingers buttressing his cheek. "How could the monitors tell the subjects something they don't know?"

Delphine exhaled slowly. "A double blind."

"Think about it, Delphine," Aldous said airily. "If our sole intent had been to test issues of viability and longevity, why not keep all the subjects together, here, and raise them and care for them without all these . . . troublesome logistics?"

"You wanted to observe nature versus nurture, yes," Delphine said lowly. "The monitors observe and report on the behavior of the subjects. But how do they know what to report when they don't know what they're reporting on?"

"They report to those who do know what to look for, of course. Like any basic academic social study. Levels and levels, Delphine. This wasn't put into place overnight." Aldous leaned back in his chair. "You should consider yourself privileged. Not many get a peek at this much of the picture."

"What about the medical data?"

"This shouldn't be much of a leap now," prodded Aldous.

"The monitors . . . provide direct access," Delphine suggested measuredly, though the idea of it, the pure logistics impressed a scope of surety and impunity that bowled her over.

Aldous waved a careless hand.

Delphine straightened up, easing her grip on the chair so that her fingertips merely rested on it, and mentally constructed the scenarios.
She shook her head.
"The monitors know what they're doing. But they don't know why. So then why—" Delphine caught herself.

But Aldous was watching. He folded his hands and placed them serenely atop the desk.

"Why do they do it? If not for science? Or knowledge? Or progress?" Aldous smiled. "People have simple desires, Delphine. It's just a matter of determining what they are."

A chill prickled Delphine's skin.
Just as Aldous had determined what she wanted.
He hadn't been wrong.

Delphine wet her lips. "Jennifer's video diaries—you have them all?"

Aldous's eyebrows rose.

"May I see them?" Delphine requested.

Aldous's eyes narrowed, as if in the spot Delphine occupied something unexpected had appeared.

Delphine met his scrutiny calmly. "I need to start looking at the bigger picture."

* 

By the time Shay made her way to the door, she partly suspected—or perhaps hoped—her unanticipated visitor had left. It wasn't the likeliest scenario. The few lights on in the apartment shed into the hallway through the glass pane set in the front door—one of the few scruples Shay had with the space—so there was little pretense in pretending not to be home. Not that Shay would. Not these days, though the temptation to lie on the ground cocooned in the dim of a darkened room and idle for an interminable lump of time, letting seconds slip and stretch as much as they pleased until she might fall through the resultant cracks, gripped still with an appeal that was difficult to shrug away.

But getting up off the floor to answer a knock at the door was a far cry from having the wherewithal to socialize.

A crack between frame and door, about as much as a chain would have allowed, admitted the sight of a back receding down the hall and stopping.


An ache radiated dully from the pit of Shay's stomach.

In the second Delphine began to initiate her turn, an impulse spurred Shay to shut the door. Because she was tired and the mere sight of Delphine's back struck the chord of loneliness she had no reserves to ignore. She got halfway there. Maybe she was deterred by speed, that half-second dullness that left a sliver through which Delphine glimpsed Shay, their eyes meeting with the electric suddenness of discovered surveillance. Maybe it was some base instinct that recognized before conscious thought the frantic energy of Delphine's movements, that she hadn't been retreating but pacing. Maybe it was just manners that dictated it was rude to shut the door on a visitor.
Maybe it was Delphine. From whom Shay wanted to hide. Whom Shay was apparently loath to refuse.

Shay eased the door back to an approximation of ajar.

Delphine had managed but another step after their eyes met, hands falling to her sides, body language downshifting through the slowing momentum, from restless to pleased to unsure to—advance coming to a standstill—uncertain and wary.

Shay remained behind the door, face obscured by its edge. The wood leached coolness into Shay where she lay her forehead against it.

"Shay," Delphine said at last, partly a question, somewhat a greeting, a hint of embarrassed reluctance.

"Hey," Shay said in acknowledgement. Then, clutching the edge of the door, added, "I wish you had sent a message ahead. I could have saved you a trip."

Delphine breathed evenly. Her eyes took a studied, intent interest on Shay's face. "I'm sorry. I should have. I wasn't thinking." She wet her lips. "I wasn't planning to come."

Common courtesy might have allowed Shay a brusque exchange and dismissal, but friendship urged an invitation of respite for a distressed friend. Shay could. Shay could usher Delphine inside and coax forth her anxieties and listen and appear mindful and maybe even feel like she was—all the while sitting there with the presence of mind of a meat puppet, tracking the minutes as faithfully as the hands of a clock, wondering when she might reclaim her solitude, at what point would it be polite to herd her guest toward the door.

Shay pressed her lips together. "I can't, Delphine."

Delphine nodded. "I understand."

Delphine did understand. In her eyes Shay saw kindness and compassion that made her gut roil with relief and regret, an astringent that scrubbed over Shay's nerves so that she felt raw and exposed.

Anger simmered, too, small and petty. Because if Delphine had called, they wouldn't be having this exchange and Delphine wouldn't be seeing her like this and Shay wouldn't feel guilty and coddled and inadequate and resentful.

Neither said anything. Several times Delphine looked on the verge of speaking, but refrained.

"I'm sorry," Shay said, plainly, to save Delphine the trouble.

Delphine shook her head. "No, no. I'll go."

Shay nodded. Delphine shifted her weight—from one foot to the other, not to go. She bit at her lower lip.

"May I have a hug before I go?" Delphine asked.

The request was so unexpected and uncharacteristic that Shay simply didn't react.

Delphine watched her carefully, equally as still, until it occurred to Shay that neither of them was going to move until the other did something.

"A hug?" Shay asked.
Delphine nodded. "Yes."

A hug. Shay and Delphine didn't hug. They engaged in gestures akin to hugs, a hand on a shoulder or a grip on an arm as they said hello or goodbye, but mostly for balance trading pecks of salutations and departure.

Shay wasn't against hugs. She hadn't known Delphine was for them.

Granted, she still didn't know.

Shay pulled the door open wider in response. Delphine crossed to her in a telegraphed approach and waited for Shay to extend her arms before she enfolded Shay gingerly around the shoulders. Shay let herself be engulfed, not moving much, but as Delphine held on, embrace tightening, Shay raised her arms to hang onto Delphine's doubled over frame, palms spread flat upon Delphine's back, and rested her cheek on the taller woman's shoulder.

Delphine breathed in deeply and exhaled.

Shay inhaled and floated in the scent of Delphine's perfume.

"I bet I know what you're doing," Shay murmured.

"What am I doing?" Delphine asked.

"Trying to trigger oxytocin."

Delphine exhalation stuttered into Shay's hair in what might have been a laugh. "Is it working?"

"For you or for me?"

"Did you have a bad day at work?"

Shay shook her head against Delphine. "No. Not really. It was a pretty average day. I was the one performing below average. Did you have a bad day?"

Delphine was quiet. "It was not . . . bad." A second later, rubbing absentmindedly at Shay's back, she reinforced her words, as if repetition imbued truth. "It wasn't bad. It was unexpected. There were things that were unexpected."

"In a bad way?"

"A surprising one."

"How did you end up here?"

"I was driving around. Then I noticed I was here." Delphine's grip squeezed and relented. Delphine pulled back, gripping Shay at the elbows.

"Was that long enough?" Shay asked sardonically.

"I believe studies say hugs need to last at least twenty seconds to have an effect."

Shay summoned a smirk. "I think we're good to go."

Delphine peered at her closely. "Will you be okay if I go?"
"Will you?" Shay countered, because she was familiar with where she was. What she didn't know was if wherever Delphine was, whatever headspace had taken her winding through the streets and brought her here, was foreign territory to Delphine.

A part of Shay anticipated Delphine asking to stay. A part of her wished Delphine would stay for her.

But Delphine nodded. "I will."

Shay nodded back. Then she hugged Delphine again, briefly, before they parted.

* *

The text arrived around noon: *Are you okay?*

Shay stared at it. Her drafted reply read: *Please don't.*

Her thumb hovered over the send button. Shaking her head she detoured to the delete key.

*I'm OK. How are u?*

*Okay. But not enough data to determine if due to hugs.*

To her surprise, Shay laughed out loud.
Chapter 15

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Curiosity embarked Delphine on the journey through Jennifer's video diaries, apprehension sat in her gut as her viewing companion, and, by the time she tuned into new entries week by week as to a show in syndication, masochism fueled her dedication.

The videos weren't edited. Not in any professional or intentional sense. No second party sensibility distinguished the notable from the inconsequential. Nothing was shortened for convenience or framed for variety and interest. It was just . . . Jennifer.

Some clips were mere seconds of footage, the record button hit, the scene introduced in a flash, Jennifer sometimes already centered and present or shuffling into frame, where she sat in a block of silence that ended in reconsideration and a scramble toward the camera or a signal—then abrupt blackness. She recorded sometimes at stretches, so that these blanks sometimes reopened on a minute later or an hour or a day, as marked by timestamps and corroborating clues: the amount of light in a room, the type of lighting, the direction and length of shadows, her outfit—or Greg's.

He was there. Usually. Mostly implied. His was the hand operating the camera. His was the voice that might answer a question or provide a comment or offer a prompt. He was the off-screen target toward which Jennifer glanced or to whom she spoke or at whom she smiled or laughed to gauge her performance.

The diary was a performance. Improv without a script. The early entries meandered hesitant and empty as Jennifer searched for subjects to expound on. She presented dread facts frankly. She didn't cry. She didn't verbalize her emotions. But Delphine saw the fear and uncertainty. In the way Jennifer's eyes bounced around the room avoiding the gaze of the camera. How she hung her head with furrowed brow. The silences that buffered the relation of prognoses. If she viewed her video diary as a way to cope, it wasn't a medium to vent.

If Jennifer cursed her circumstances or fate, it wasn't on camera.

Wilful ignorance didn't buttress her composure. Nor did hope. Denial, then, perhaps, or a lack of understanding the depth of the pronouncement of "unidentified polyps." Or maybe Jennifer had nerves honed through years of high-stakes competition.

Brought into relief by the ebullience—and pride of Greg—that colored Jennifer's announcement of DYAD's offer of aid.

The move to Canada was announced soon after and in the next clip they were there, Jennifer and Greg in the surroundings of a foreign apartment that was whiter and brighter than their previous accommodations, Delphine watching in the comfort of hers. The anxious excitement of just a video before gave way to the discomfort of upheaval. Jennifer fidgeted in a new chair, as if she couldn't adjust to its dimensions or texture. This place wasn't home and it wasn't meant to be. It was temporary housing until they could wing south back across the border. Delphine noted that in the small snatches of the apartment that she saw, the couple didn't settle in. The walls didn't acquire the flourishes of posters and paintings. Instead, over time the unadorned surface sprouted and bloomed cards and tissue paper flowers, a string of colorful origami cranes, the occasional balloon of well wishes that floated and deflated in the background.
All was disorientation in Jennifer's narrative. A city of unfamiliar streets down which she and Greg took wrong turns. Impressions of buildings and facilities she didn't have the clarity or words to paint. Lament for the faces to which Jennifer had forgotten all the names. All but one:

"Finally got to meet Dr. Leekie in person today. He's . . . he's an amazing man. Now that we've seen DYAD, I don't know how we can thank him for his help. He seems really—" Jennifer gazed off into the distance. "I think he really cares."

Delphine couldn't contradict Jennifer's assessment. Aldous did care. In more ways than Jennifer could have intuited.

Like Delphine herself.

She, too, played a character in Jennifer's account, lumped with the rest who took shape over time.

"Dr. Estrada is my primary physician. He seems nice? He tries to talk to me directly and explain things in terms I understand, which I like. The only weird thing is that I feel like I need to smile around him because he's always smiling? Like I see him smile so I have to smile back. I wonder if I look weird. Like I'm not sure if I should be smiling?" A laugh answered off-screen. "No, seriously! Do I look as overwhelmed as I feel? I keep thinking that he's going to think I'm an idiot." Jennifer sighed. "Dr. Estrada's got great teeth, though. Like the whitest teeth. Right?"

"Gina is my favorite nurse. She has really gentle hands; I barely feel it when she takes blood. She's so funny, too! She's always telling me stories about her Pomeranians and showing me pictures of them. I only found out today that she has a son! I know, right? Did you have any idea?"

"Kelly never smiles. Did you notice that? It's weird because Dr. Estrada is always smiling. Do you think she's always like that? Maybe she hates her job? But no one else is so . . . serious. I mean, everyone is serious, but not like . . . I hate to say it, but, like, dour. Maybe it's me? Maybe I pissed her off at some point and didn't even know it." ("Nah, impossible, babe. I doubt it's you. She looks at me the same way.")

"I always feel so weird going into the DYAD buildings. Like everyone else obviously works there and there I am . . . totally out of place. Henry, though, one of the security guards, is really sweet. When he sees me, he's always like, 'Good morning, Ms. Fitzsimmons!' One time I said, 'Is it a good morning?' And he said, 'Mine is now!'" ("He's hitting on you, babe?") "He's not hitting on me! He's probably like ten years older than I am. At least. He's just being sweet." ("I don't know . . . He's one of the younger guys, right? If you're trying to make me jealous . . .") "Stop it." ("I wouldn't blame him . . .") "Greg!"

"There's this other doctor who works with me—I haven't really mentioned her before because I mostly speak to Dr. Estrada—but today we talked and it was . . . nice. Normal. I don't know what I was expecting. She's this . . . gorgeous French woman." ("Hey, don't look at me like that. You know I've got eyes only for you.") "Look, babe, it's easier to understand that you noticed her rather than you didn't." Jennifer gazed straight into the camera. "Yeah, that kind of beautiful. Anyway, I thought it would be awkward or hard to talk with her—I don't know why. If I think about it, it's not that she was standoffish or anything. I think she just looks so . . . sophisticated. I mean, she is. But she's also nice."

Such were the simple early days.

Vibrancy still radiated from Jennifer then. Even a hint of excitement, the thrill of being in a new city to explore—and they did, she and Greg, starting with tourist attractions that Jennifer reviewed favorably. There was energy in her movements, wholeness and substance in her limbs, that startled
Delphine to remember. She witnessed again the encroaching diminishment of passing weeks, the sloughing off of weight and the muscular definition of an athlete, the jut of bones and joints becoming prominent, eroding in the double time of time-lapse.

As did the exuberance.

The treatments weren't working.

They were many and changing and ceaseless and beyond the scope of probably even the doctors' reason or rationality and, inevitably, bound to exhaust the realm of possibility.

And one after another they made Jennifer feel like shit.

She didn't actually use those words. Not once. She felt nauseated, ill, under the weather, not so hungry, tired, unable to sleep, unable to keep meals down, dizzy, bloated, headachy, gross. All on top of her body's own manufactured betrayals, the shortness of breath, the puss and the blood she constantly coughed up, the cramps and the spotting like an unpredictable, ceaseless menstrual cycle, the ebb and flow of aches and weakness.

The outings about the city dwindled. Tapered. Stopped. Jennifer didn't have the energy. Or the will. Even though the world constricted to the white walls of sterile rooms. At the apartment. At DYAD.

The complaints were familiar to Delphine, though recounted with the bowed shoulders of defeat and the edge of a bleak, caustic sarcasm that could descend into long, unbroken silences where Jennifer gazed off camera, face sometimes pinched, sometimes smooth with a blankness of vacancy, as if she were in the midst of abandoning her body and leaving behind an unanimated shell.

Yet life went on. Particularly those of the people she'd left behind. Jennifer related all the minutiae of the news she received from them. As if the recounting could assuage the awareness that she was removed from events that would have included her, as if her inclusion in being informed painted a space for her in their passage, a spot that was being held in reserve.

They were normal, mundane things, but it was the normality that Jennifer craved from her entrapment in isolation.

There weren't two sides to Jennifer Fitzsimmons. There weren't the videos and the person Delphine saw face-to-face. There was only one woman, with whom Delphine had limited contact in person. Delphine recognized the woman projected through pixels on her monitor. She read as a natural extension of the woman who could wield a sharp look or a droll comment or who preferred a nurse's touch over Delphine's or who could establish easy connections with other people and interest in their affairs.

She appeared exactly like the woman who had no idea that she was the valuable subject of a monumental undertaking or that Delphine and others were viewing these videos courtesy of her boyfriend.

Greg.

At first, with the knowledge of what he did and what he provided—how wrong she had been to think he didn't know what service to render—anchored in the back of her mind, Delphine couldn't look at him whenever they occupied the same room. A part of Delphine attempted to willfully ignore him. His presence. His role. His nervousness and agitation. His affection. The deceit.

Her complicity in the charade.
Then Delphine couldn't stop looking at him. In the videos. In person. Studying his actions and expressions, how he made sure to conduct Jennifer to and from the DYAD, how he gave the staff wide berth to conduct their business, how he attempted to soothe Jennifer in the distress of affliction, how he looked lost, how he appeared afraid.

Delphine watched and dissected and weighed.

She couldn't determine if there were two Gregs.

That was the problem. Delphine couldn't have said with a certainty beyond a shadow of a doubt that Greg's care and attention weren't genuine, even as she knew objectively and rationally that Greg compromised Jennifer's privacy (and body) to people who were strangers to him.

Sometimes she wondered what Aldous could have possibly offered Greg that kept him tethered—and eager—in his place beside Jennifer. Sometimes her mind whispered that Greg's true motivator might have been fear and self-preservation. Sometimes she hazarded that maybe it was a selfish bent of a different sort, that Greg remained voluntarily in the name and capacity of boyfriend.

One morning, standing before the mirror in her bathroom, Delphine proposed to the woman gazing back at her, "Il peut y avoir plus d'une raison."

Her reflection nodded. "Comme pour Aldous."

Delphine leaned in close and whispered, "Comme pour toi."

A miasma engulfed Delphine across the threshold into the treatment room. It wasn't medicinal or disinfectant smells—Delphine was accustomed to those—but an intangible sense of gravity that acted like a coagulant of somberness. Jennifer and Greg sat huddled together, Jennifer doubled over, Greg leaning down with his head bowed over the crown of her head, one hand laid flat upon Jennifer's back and moving in soothing circles. Soft murmurs emanated from their bubble.

Not the retching that Delphine expected. Such as when Jennifer expelled a clot.

Aldous wordlessly held out a folder to Delphine when she entered his office. The sight of the slim offering slowed her pace to a rhythm more reserved, ending in a crawl that brought her right to the edge of Aldous's desk. With a flick of his wrist, he waved the file at her. Delphine took it. Holding it loosely between her hands, she glanced at its blank cover. "What's this?"
Aldous indicated the file with a thrust of his chin.

Delphine swallowed, noting how inconsequential the weight of the folder was in her grip, and flipped open the cover. The first page was a summary of identification information.

"Katja Obinger?" she said aloud, hesitantly. "Another subject?"

Aldous tapped at his lips, quiet.

Delphine turned to the next item.

Chest X-rays.

Delphine didn't need to hold them up to the light. She could guess what she would see. They probably could have been mistaken for Jennifer's, from months earlier.

Delphine's shoulders slumped. She looked down at Aldous over the top of the file.

"Another one?"

Aldous frowned and gazed off at the far wall. "It's too early to draw any definitive connection or conclusion between the two cases. But . . . a preliminary scan is very . . . reminiscent."

Delphine gave the remaining pages a cursory glance and shut the file. "Will she be brought here?"

Aldous held out his hand expectantly. "Katja is in Germany."

Delphine tapped the edge of the file against her palm before she handed it back. "What will be done for her? We know what didn't work for Jennifer and we're close to exhausting—"

"Katja is not your concern," Aldous said with leisure frankness.

Delphine paused mid-word, mouth agape. After a second, she collected herself. "Then why did you show me that?"

"Because this is the work we do, Delphine," Aldous said. "We need to maintain perspective. It's good to have reminders of what's at stake."

A seething anger and indignation took to a low simmer in Delphine's gut. Flexing her jaw to loosen taut muscles, she asked, "What if Jennifer dies?"

Aldous sat back in his chair and regarded Delphine coolly. If he discerned her anger, he gave no sign. Even the whiff of perturbation evaporated. "I wasn't aware we determined this affliction was fatal."

Delphine shook her head minutely. "Might not be what kills her. What if Jennifer dies?"

Aldous spread his hands. "What if Jennifer dies?"

Delphine stood quiet.

Aldous cocked his head. "What are you asking, Delphine? Do you want a distinction? Between Jennifer Fitzsimmons, teacher, swim coach, daughter, girlfriend and the subject you and I know, a wholly unique specimen that is one of the major steps in the next phase of human evolution?"

Is that what she wanted to know? What it would mean for the Project? What the Project's priorities
were?

Or was she asking after Aldous? How it would affect him? If it would affect him?

Aldous took a deep breath and folded his hands across his middle. "She wouldn't be the first. We've lost subjects here and there throughout the years to accidents and disease. It's reality, Delphine. Human reality. For now."

Aldous studied her. "The thought of the possible death of any subject pleases no one. All of us would like to see her through this."

Because Jennifer—this Katja or any other subject—was worth more to them alive?

It was true.

Objectively, as a scientist, Delphine knew it was true. Just as she knew that even deceased Jennifer would provide them with a case study. Information that would contribute to understanding the other subjects. Future subjects.

But what did that mean to people who knew Jennifer? Her students? Her friends? Her family? The man who was her lover and her keeper both?

People who made promises to do yoga with her?

*

From Delphine [10:19]: I'm looking at a bottle of wine and a bottle of whiskey. I plan to drink them. Care to help me?
To Delphine [10:20]: Whiskey not rly my thing.
From Delphine [10:20]: Would you prefer vodka?
To Delphine [10:21]: Not rly.
From Delphine [10:21]: Whiskey, then. I can finish that.
To Delphine [10:21]: What? Are u serious???
To Delphine [10:22]: What's going on???? Are u alright?
From Delphine [10:22]: Will you join me?
From Delphine [10:22]: Or not?
To Delphine [10:23]: That doesn't sound like a good idea Delphine.
To Delphine [10:25]: Delpine????
To Delphine [10:27]: Delphine? Where are u?
To Delphine [10:28]: Come over, ok? We can talk.
From Delphine [10:35]: I'm here.

*

Delphine turned up stone-faced, completely serious and deadset on her stated plans, and uninterested in talking, much less being deterred by entreaties and cajoling. Honestly, she didn't even need a bottle opener or a drinking glass for the whiskey, so the prospect of withheld tools wasn't a viable tactic to stop her.

So Shay didn't.

She put ice in the tumbler, handed it to Delphine, and sat down with her guest in her living room.

Shay perched on the single seater. Delphine eyed the couch, features smooth and impassive.
She lowered herself down, reclined slowly, crossed her legs, and sipped.

They were quiet.

For a very long time.

It took a long time for Delphine to manage about half of the bottle.

"What if," Delphine said, slumping in a list over the armrest, and immediately Shay could tell she was drunk, truly and actually well beyond tipsy, which, why not, this whole evening had been strange, unpredicted, and unpredictable, what was Delphine sloshed and finally talking any more remarkable than her being drunk on Shay's couch, "what if we could engineer humans to be—to be re . . . resistant to disease and . . . and free—of mental ailments?"

That . . . was certainly unexpected.

Shay interlaced her fingers and leaned forward, elbows on her thighs. "You mean like depression?"

"Yes."

Shay sat on that. "Can we do that?"


"That's . . . that's crazy."

Delphine turned bright eyes on her. "Should we?"

"What?"

"Should we, if we could? Like a form of . . . preventive medicine."

"I don't—" Shay shook her head. "I don't know."

Delphine's head fell back over the top of the couch. "Would you consider such people human beings still?"

Shay's brow crinkled.

"No one would have to know they were different," Delphine breathed. "No one would know."

Delphine said nothing else for long enough afterward that Shay thought she might have, mercifully, fallen asleep.

"Mutations occur all the time, naturally," Delphine said, dispelling that notion. "Nature . . . editing . . . the combinations and features of our genes. It's . . . beyond our control. Well. Not beyond. We do it, too. Gee. Em. Ohs," drawled Delphine. "But you don't like that, do you? I bet . . . you don't. But it's not bad. You know? It's about taking control. About understanding . . . how everything works at the most . . . most basic level." She paused and whispered, "Most basic? Basicest? Yes, most basic. Most basic." She exhaled heavily. "Genetic profiles wouldn't have to be left to chance anymore." She shook her head, head lolling from side to side atop the couch. "Mais si il y a un problème, c'est de notre faute. Ce serait de notre faute, non?"

The switch to French was new. Delphine rarely, if ever in full sentences, spoke in her native French. She didn't need to with her fluency in English. Shay's knowledge of French, on the other hand, comprised a smattering of vocabulary here and there and picking out Spanish cognates.
Shay sat glued to her seat. She wanted, she would have, she should have gotten up, and retrieved a blanket, draped it over Delphine and told her to sleep. But. But she felt a little afraid, of what Delphine was saying, why she was rambling on, tossing out incomprehensible French, what it could mean, if it even meant anything.

As Shay sat frozen and uncertain, Delphine hauled herself into an upright sitting position and declared, "I should go."

"Whoa, whoa, no, no," Shay sang as she darted out of her seat and bounded over to lay a hand on Delphine's shoulder to restrain the wobbly scientist.

In a heartbeat, Delphine grabbed Shay's forearm with her free hand and gazed earnestly into her eyes. With newfound energy, Delphine claimed, "No one would have to feel sad again. Sad like you do."

"That's just human," Shay said, pitching her voice low to sound soothing.

"Only because we let it be," Delphine countered, voice hard with insistence. "Only because social constructs say it is. What about those people who don't feel fear or pain or compassion? Are they not human?"

"It's human to be different, too," Shay attempted to cajole Delphine. "We all look different, see things differently, have different opinions, have different experiences and different perspectives."

"We could be better. Stronger. Shouldn't we try to become better?"

Shay took a steadying breath.

"When we have nothing left to fear, when we make ourselves everything we imagine we want to be," Shay said, putting her free hand atop Delphine's on her arm, "will we even want it? If shorter people could be just a little taller, then would everyone else want to be just a little bit taller than that?"

Delphine's eyes narrowed on her. "You are saying that the only way to be satisfied is to let go of desire. But maybe that's a coward's way out. An excuse not to try and reach beyond limits, so as not to fail."

"I'm a simple person, Delphine," Shay said softly. "I don't know what the answers are, just what works for me. The only thing I know right now is that you're not going home like this. I'm going to get you a glass of water, and after you drink that then you can sleep here. You can sleep on the bed and I'll sleep on the couch. Okay?"

Delphine's grip tightened on her arm.

"Delphine," Shay breathed, taking hold of Delphine's hand and trying to gently remove it.

"They hate us."

Shay shook her head. "No one hates you."

"You don't hate me?" Delphine asked, faintly muddled with puzzlement, most likely clouded by alcohol.

"Why would I hate you?"

Delphine's eyes lost their focus. "Si elles savaient, elles nous détesteraient." Delphine released Shay.
"I should go."

"No," Shay said sternly. "You're not going anywhere." She took a tentative step back, keeping a finger pointed at Delphine. "Stay."

She kept an eye fixed on Delphine the entire trip to the kitchen and back. Delphine traded her tumbler for the glass of water with docile obedience.

"This wasn't supposed to happen," Delphine said as she sat holding the glass in both hands.

That was the last substantial thing of the night she said.

*  

Dryness in her throat and the cotton furriness lining her tongue and mouth dragged Delphine to growing consciousness. Forcing her eyes open brought a stab of pain as brightness—daylight, sunlight, did she not close the blinds?—filtered through the crack between her eyelids, followed by a second assault when she flinched.

"Ah, merde," moaned Delphine under her breath, turning to lie on her back and raising a hand to cover her eyes.

The sound of water running through a faucet nearby gave Delphine pause.

She cautiously removed her hand and, squinting, raised her head enough to look over the blankets piled atop her. In the diluted illumination Delphine made out a figure at the kitchen sink. With a twist of the handle, the water shut off and Shay hauled a watering can from out of the sink basin.

Delphine was in Shay's apartment. In Shay's—Delphine glanced down and balked at the bright sheets—bed, yes. Shay was—the speed at which Delphine attempted to shift her focus brought her up short with another pang and a pitch of her stomach—fully dressed and attending to the plants, testing soil with her fingertips, gently blowing at accumulated dust, rubbing leaves between her fingers and breaking off shriveled ones.

Shay glanced over at the bed briefly, then looked again. The water can tipped back to stem the flow.

"Hey," Shay called softly. She swiped her hand open-palmed across the bottom of the can and set it down on the nearest surface. Wiping her hands on the back of her jeans, she took a few steps toward the bed. "Good morning. You awake?"

Delphine dropped her head back atop the pillows and crossed her forearms over her eyes.

Shay giggled. Lowly. "Let me get you some water. Then I'll whip you up a smoothie. Great for hangovers. It'll be loud but you'll thank me later."

Delphine heard the whoosh of water spilling into a glass, then shortly thereafter a plunk upon wood closeby. "Here's the water. Now you might want to cover your ears."

After a bit of listening to a knife smack against a cutting board, Delphine rolled onto her side and wrangled a pillow around her head. In time a blender whirred with enthusiastic determination, stopped, pulsed, and fell into blessed silence.

A hand alighted gently on Delphine's shoulder. Delphine unfolded with reluctance and, on her back again, squinted up at Shay and the vibrant green substance in the glass. Shay smiled.
"Want a straw?" Shay asked.

"Wh—" Sound barely emerged from Delphine's parched throat. She swallowed a few times to generate moisture. "What happened?"

Shay shook her head. "Nothing happened. You came over last night, drank half a bottle of whiskey—maybe more than that—and then I refused to let you go home."

Delphine closed her eyes against the rush of regret. "Sorry."

"It's okay," Shay said. "Do you want to try sitting up?"

Delphine gingerly scooted and pushed herself up against the headboard, then finally accepted the glass from Shay. She eyed it. "What is this?"

"Salts, minerals, electrolytes, all the things your body is craving right now."

Delphine sipped and chewed at leafy bits and seeds that mashed into the crevices between her molars. There were notes of coconut, something tart, perhaps a berry, and . . . cinnamon?

Under Shay's keen eyes, Delphine nodded in consideration.

"Okay?" Shay hazarded.

"Tart," Delphine said with a little smile to show she was only teasing. She winced against the dull pounding in her skull.

"Probably the yogurt and the blueberries. I'll add more honey next time," Shay noted. "For now, let me get you some aspirin."

As she turned to go rummage in a cupboard, Delphine muttered, "I hope there isn't a next time."

Shay returned and dropped two white pills into Delphine's palm. Delphine promptly tossed them into her mouth and chased the pills down with the smoothie concoction. The mixture sat uncertainly in her roiling stomach. Delphine held herself still. She wasn't sure her body wouldn't outright reject everything.

Biding time, Delphine asked, "You had all of these ingredients sitting around?"

Shay shook her head and lowered herself to sit on the edge of the bed. "Not all of them. I made a run when I woke up."

Delphine closed her eyes again, to ward off embarrassment. "I'm sorry. You didn't have to go through the trouble."

Shay patted Delphine's knee. "It's fine. I think it was a pretty fair guess that you'd be feeling that whiskey when you woke up."

"Was I sick?" Delphine asked.

"No," Shay assured her. "You don't remember?"

Delphine shook her head. "Not clearly."

Shay studied her with kind eyes. "Did you forget what you wanted to forget?"
Delphine met her eyes. "No."

Shay nodded. Her gaze dropped to study the duvet. When she raised her head, her lips curved in a small smile. She rubbed Delphine's knee. "Take your time. I don't have plans for today."

Delphine wobbled out of bed within five minutes—to appease her bladder—and discovered she'd slept fully clothed but for her shoes. Splashing cold water on her face helped, but mostly it was sitting in the single seater, nursing the smoothie, and allowing the aspirin to disperse into her bloodstream over the following forty-five minutes that brought her closer to functional.

Shay disappeared to shower and perform the admirable function of prepping her appearance for most of Delphine's recuperation time. Sitting with the bathroom door in her line of sight, Delphine was idly struck how every door in the space was fitted with windows, as if privacy were an afterthought left to one's discretion rather than a priority.

When Shay emerged, dressed and ready for the day, Delphine asked, "Hungry?"

Shay did a little stutter step. "Are you? I can whip something up."

Delphine shook her head. "I was thinking lunch."

Shay's head canted to an angle of doubt. "You mean go out? Don't you want to . . . rest?"

Delphine smiled and filled in the blank of Shay's protracted pause. "Or at least go home and make myself presentable?"

Shay crossed her arms. "Seriously? The only thing you might need is an iron, and even then you'd surpass presentable. I have an iron, if you want, and you're welcome to use the shower."

"Not the bathtub?" Delphine inquired innocently.

Shay's complete, unguarded stupefaction nearly justified the poor judgement and mortification of the last thirteen hours. Shay recovered with a small shake of her head. "Okay, I see that you're feeling almost back to normal." She unfolded her arms and trekked into the living room quadrant. "And if the bathtub weren't in the middle of my living room—or even if the folding screen provided enough cover—I'd say go for it. But . . . yeah, probably not the best idea."

Delphine smiled. "So . . . lunch?"

Shay subjected Delphine to a lengthy consideration. "Are you sure you're feeling up to it? You don't have to force yourself." She placed a hand atop the back cushion of the couch and picked at the fabric. "And if you feel like you need to—make up for last night or whatever—don't."

Delphine acknowledged to herself that her proposal did derive in part from similar sentiment—similar but not identical, not an obligation to make amends, but a desire to express gratitude—and that Shay's deduction made her uneasy—raising the prospect that she could be so transparent—and swaddled with warmth.

Buoyed by the burst of relief, Delphine gave Shay honesty.

"Nothing like that. Though thank you. For everything. I'm feeling much better." Delphine took a breath. "I'm . . . I'd rather not go home at the moment. I'd rather go to lunch with you. If you don't mind."

Shay drummed an agitated beat upon the couch. But she nodded. "Okay. Do you want to shower
Delphine chuckled. "That's the second time. Are you asking me or telling me?" She arched an impertinent brow. "Can you smell me from over there?"

Shay grinned, eyes alight with amusement and exasperation. "No, but you're probably still oozing whiskey through your pores. C'mon, let's go put something more substantial in you."

"Are you afraid to die?" Delphine asked Shay while she idly spooned the remnants of broth in her bowl.

Shay didn't drop her spoon into her own bowl at the sudden introduction of such a grave topic, but managed to set it carefully balanced upon the lip. She'd expected they were going to have a light lunch, both in fare and conversation given the circumstances that had brought them to the little Vietnamese diner. At the suggestion, Delphine had smiled to herself as she adjusted the passenger seat in the Volkswagen to accommodate her legs and wrestled with the seatbelt.

"You don't like Vietnamese?" Shay had asked.

"I've never had . . . phở?"

"It's noodles and meat in a beef broth. Normally. The place I'm thinking of serves a vegetarian version, if that's okay."

"Sure."

"I've heard it's good hangover food," Shay had added, unsure if Delphine was just agreeing to her suggestion to placate her. Especially given that smile, almost a laugh.

The expression had reappeared right after. "I was just thinking—once I went to eat Vietnamese food because I thought—there is a part of their cuisine that is inspired by French culinary culture. So I thought: Oh, it might be similar to food from home."

"Was it?"

Delphine had laughed. "Not at all."

The cheeriness of an hour ago had since faded and Shay wondered if Delphine's question was an extension of the previous night's conversation. When they'd started meeting outside of Shay's office, Shay would have considered Delphine perhaps one of the last people due for an existential crisis. But the scientist's moods as of late seemed poised on a slope sliding her backwards, pulling her down.

Shay took her time weighing the question.

"Yeah?" she said at last. Shifting in her seat, she quickly added, "I mean, less in the sense of being afraid of . . . what comes next or whatever, like being punished for eternity, and more like . . . Well, I want to live. I don't want to die now."

She considered Delphine, her slumped posture, the ceaseless but listless stirring of the remainder of her lunch, the slight bruising beneath her eyes that served as testament to last night, the dent in her brow that was distant pensiveness.

"Are . . . you afraid to die?" Shay asked cautiously.
Delphine was quiet for some time. When she spoke, she seemed to address the general vicinity. "I see what you mean." Which wasn't quite an answer until she said, "I also feel like there are many things I still want to do. I wouldn't be . . . I wouldn't be ready at this moment."

"Is something . . . wrong?" Shay asked delicately.

Delphine snapped to attention, focusing on her. "Excuse me?"

"Is something wrong?" Shay repeated, with less hesitation.

Delphine looked confused for a second, then surprised. "You mean with me? No. No, no, no. I'm fine. I was . . . just thinking about it."

About death.

"Okay," Shay afforded softly. Between yesterday and today Delphine was thinking about a lot of things. Maybe she always was. Shay nudged the small tea cup by her hand. "You know, I think we mean it differently."

"Hm?" Delphine hummed, still lost half in her thoughts.

"When I say that I'm not ready to die and you say it, I think we mean it differently."

"What do you mean?" Delphine asked gamely, rallying greater attention to bear on the conversation.

"When I say it," Shay said measuredly, "I mean there's still so much I want to experience. Places I want to see. Foods I want to try. Books I want to read. Things like that. When you say it, it's like . . . it's like you have a list of things you need to accomplish and you haven't checked off all the items yet."

Delphine frowned for a beat. Radiating the doubt of someone answering a tricky question on an exam, Delphine said, "Yes?"

Shay laughed. "I'm just saying. It's . . . an observation."

"Now you are becoming a scientist," Delphine said with approval, mien lightening.

Shay threw up her hands half-heartedly. "Oh no. Though maybe it was bound to happen." She squashed the impulse to poke Delphine and resorted to propping her chin in her hand. "Something up? You're not usually so . . . grim."

"Or prone to drinking excessively and passing out in your apartment?" Delphine said drily, an eyebrow quirkling. She exhaled heavily through her nose and answered, more seriously, "No. No, nothing—" She sat, seeming to search for an adjective for a long time, then settled on, "Nothing."

"You seem . . . more stressed out lately," Shay said.

Delphine shook her head. "Work."

Shay nodded. The word always served as a wall over which no further conversation could hurdle. They descended into silence.

Abruptly Delphine said, "I'm sorry. Am I being boring?"

Shay grinned, caught off guard by Delphine's self-consciousness. "No. I'm fine if you're fine."
Delphine's eyes narrowed with skepticism. "Really?"

Shay shrugged. "Yeah. Of course. Are you trying to tell me that I talk too much and that it's weird if I'm quiet?"

Delphine smiled in lieu of the laughter Shay hoped for. Still better than her earlier mood. "No. I just don't want you to be uncomfortable. Or to . . . feel like you're wasting your time with me here when I was the one to drag you out."

"Well, I guess I could be taking a nice long bath," Shay sighed, "reading Jeanette Winterson."

"Oh, yes, now I feel very sorry," Delphine opined, drizzling on the mortification. Shay smiled. Delphine smiled back, gaze growing gradually shrewd. "May I—may I ask a very personal question?"

"Okay," Shay said warily, "sure."

"I think . . . I thought your answer would be different. That with your . . ."

Shay leaned forward, as if proximity would divine Delphine's unvoiced thoughts. She offered a guess. "Rough patches?"

Delphine nodded. "I thought that with your rough patches, your answer might be different."

Shay nodded slowly. "I get it. You—we sort of mentioned it last night. Depression, anyway. And, yeah, I . . . I can get depressed—like low energy, no motivation—but," she shook her head, "not suicidal." She hesitated then gambled, "Not anymore."

Delphine nodded with the deliberation of consideration. "I see."

She sat breathing evenly, then asked, "Do you think you could feel that way again?"

"Suicidal?"


"But you didn't give into it, back then," Delphine said.

"No," Shay said softly. "I don't know if I ever came close to anything like actually—" She took a steadying breath. "I thought about it, yeah, but—"

Delphine observed her closely, then said, "Life is resilient. From single-celled organisms to humans, everything struggles to live."

"Yeah," Shay agreed.

"Even when it's hopeless," Delphine said, but not to Shay, mostly under her breath.

Even so, Shay said, "Isn't that the most important time to struggle? Why else did we develop remedies and medicine, if not because we wanted to fight to live?"

Delphine looked at her intensely, appearing on the verge of a question. Yet she only said, "Yes."

Chapter End Notes
It's taken me this long to realize that I've forgotten to mention that I do not speak French. All of the French is courtesy of tumblr user haveuhadanosejob. All my thanks because, honestly, I don't know what's going on there.
In the still, darkened room, the labored, raspy respiration of the bed's occupant stuttered in disparate intervals. Time stretched and contracted by the measure.

It had only ever been a matter of time. Whether the polyps would progress or stall or regress. Whether their team would pinpoint a diagnosis or an effective treatment. Whether the human body, modified or not, could undergo such sustained, intense chemical and biological assaults. They'd whittled Jennifer's immune system to try to curb its tenacious self-indictment and had wound up on the other side of obliterated and compromised against foreign threats. Now danger lurked on two fronts.

And Jennifer had no choice but to reside within the DYAD's walls.

Greg, Delphine understood, with legal backing or naught, seemed to have assumed Jennifer's power of attorney.

Delphine couldn't imagine DYAD's legal division would probe too deeply into the matter.

She was sitting in the chair beside Jennifer's bed that was usually by right occupied by Greg. He and she had startled each other in the hallway. He had been leaving the room, Delphine contemplating going in.

"She's sleeping," he'd told her, an update or a warning or a warding off. To know would point to his chosen role. All the possibilities tumbled through Delphine's mind most days.

How did Greg look at her? Did he know that she knew? Or did he wonder, as Delphine circuitously did, about the limits of any one associate's knowledge, constantly redrawing the boundaries of what was within the reach of someone's access?

But what did it matter if Greg knew she knew about him?

It wouldn't affect Jennifer.

"Not staying?" Delphine had asked, voice hushed even though she knew the sound wouldn't penetrate into the patient room.

"I—I'm gonna step out for some air," Greg had stammered.

Delphine had nodded. "I'll sit with her for a bit." Confusion and surprise unraveled his handsome features. "If you don't mind."

"Uh, yeah, sure. She's been napping for about an hour." He'd taken a step. "I'll be back soon."

"Greg," she'd called after him shortly. He'd turned, expectant.

*What are your plans?, had been the question on her tongue. What will you do after this? What will happen to you?*

She'd smiled tightly. "The café three blocks over is better than the one closer."

He'd flashed a smile that, despite the present haggard pull of his features, brought out a youthful boyishness that Delphine could see being attractive to Jennifer. "Thanks, Dr. Cormier."
He would come back.

As Delphine did, day after day.

Day after day.

They were running out of days.

Delphine pushed herself quietly to her feet and stood by the bed. In the bed Jennifer was a small figure, barely a disturbance in the lay of the sheets. Delphine touched her exposed hand, cool and still beneath her fingers.

"I'm sorry."

Delphine never knew if she said the words aloud.

* 

"Dr. Leekie said he could help me. He lied.

"How am I doing? I'm gonna die here."

* 

Delphine realized too late that after the weeks like she'd had, she should have cancelled her plans with Shay. But the thought of meeting with Shay, who was uninvolved with everything DYAD and a sickroom and was vibrant and optimistic, seemed like a good idea: It would lift her spirits.

It hit her, some time midway through the first glass of wine, without warning and without stimulus. An uprising of despair gripped her ribs tight. Delphine breathed out, exhalation shaky, feeling the prick of moisture in her eyes, the tightness around the orbital sockets, the tremble in her hand as she raised it to wipe at her forehead. Shay leaned in close, examining her, concern rising immediately in her eyes.

"Hey," Shay said softly. "You okay? What's wrong?"

Delphine shook her head, playing off the unexpected exposure and vulnerability, swallowing to cover up the shambles of her composure. "Nothing. I'm fine."

Shay placed a hand upon her shoulder, her bad one coincidentally, but the touch felt right there, familiar, only this time rubbing lightly in small circles.

"Go ahead," Shay urged. "Let it out."

Delphine bowed her head and shook it, curls swaying and bouncing with the movement, sniffling to hold back the tears. "No. It's—it's nothing."

Shay said nothing, hand ceaseless but gentle and slow on Delphine's back, until Delphine wrestled back a semblance of poise.

"Work," Delphine said when she could speak without her voice cracking, "work has been hard. I'm . . . I'm tired."

Shay nodded. "You want to talk about it? You want to go?"

Delphine shook her head. "I can't . . . I can't talk about it."
Shay nodded.

"I just . . . I feel like a failure."

Alarm and confusion skittered across Shay's face, but she took a breath and said, "Did . . . did an experiment go wrong?"

Delphine almost laughed, because Shay's words weren't wrong, they were in actuality too right, but laughter would have sounded heinous with even a bit of context. "We have a patient . . ."

"Someone hurt? Someone sick?"

"Ill," whispered Delphine. "Very ill."

Shay sat, face a picture of whirling mental gears, perhaps snatching this and that from previous conversations, measuring Delphine's moods across their recent meetings. "Are you . . . doing everything you can?"

Delphine blew out a noisy breath. "I don't know what else we can do. I can't think of anything else that would—that would help now. That would not do more harm than good."

"You can't . . . you can't do more than that," Shay offered feebly.

"Everything we're doing is not solving the problem," Delphine said, heat in her voice, at herself and the shortcomings and ineffectualness of all their attempted treatments.

What she didn't say was that her patient had been an abstract concept not long ago, that the bitterness and resignation she saw in Jennifer Fitzsimmons seemed to be a manifestation of outrage at her contrived existence—impossible, of course, because Jennifer had no knowledge of what she was, of why she was ill, of what could possibly be making her ill, didn't have suspicions as they did that the key lay written in her genes, artificial coding that set her apart and made her and her illness unique—and seeing the fruitless rage directed blindly, helplessly at DYAD—at her—had begun to prey on Delphine's thoughts.

"When I decided not to become a practicing medical doctor," Delphine said quietly, abruptly, "many people asked me why."

She glanced over at Shay, who sat watching and listening intently.

"I had gotten good grades, did very well on my boards, made good impressions on my attending physicians. Some told me they thought I could have my pick of placement." Delphine shook her head. "But I wanted to research. I wanted to look into developing new treatments. Cures. I wanted —"

**Progress. Achievement. Recognition. Accolades.**

Delphine rubbed at her forehead.

"It's so frustrating," Delphine breathed. "Research happens so slowly. And along the way you—"

**Experiment. Fail. Try again. Fail again.**

Delphine pressed her lips together. Swallowed.

"There are people you can't help," Delphine said.
Sacrifices must be made.

Delphine had always known that. That progress was an incremental process that passed through innumerable stages. That the clones themselves were but a step toward a better model, a stabler production, that could achieve longer-term viability—and the next step in human evolution, as Aldous claimed. That's why, before, she—

I don't think I cared about the price before.

Delphine couldn't say it. She couldn't say it to Shay, who cared, or at least whom Delphine believed cared, and it was like that thought was an infection, that the failure here wasn't that of human and technological limitations, but of a failure to Jennifer Fitzsimmons, that they'd made her and what they'd made her was ill, that they couldn't fix the problems inherent in having brought her into being.

Delphine didn't know what to do with that.

She couldn't do right by Jennifer.

And it was far, far too late to run away.

Is that what Greg knew? Is that what kept him returning?

"You can't help them," Delphine whispered, "but they believed you could."

"You tried, Delphine," Shay said. Her fingers squeezed Delphine's shoulder. "You're trying."

Delphine shook her head. "All we provided was . . . false hope."

Shay sought out her eyes with her brilliant blue ones. "It wasn't false. Not if everyone involved knew there were no guarantees. And you've provided more than that. This person didn't have to go through this alone because you were there. You've been with them this whole time?" Delphine nodded. Comprehension softened Shay's gaze. "Then stay. Sometimes . . . sometimes that's the most anyone can do."

Eyes Delphine had more than once considered overly earnest searched hers. Delphine could find relief in them, in what Shay didn't know, in her lack of grasping Delphine's disappointment as doctor and scientist.

Delphine looked away.

They were abandoning Jennifer. Delphine couldn't tell Shay that. It was their fault what was happening to her and they were abandoning Jennifer.

It was the only remaining option.

Because outside of the pipe dreams that had not panned out for even a blip in the passing months—a stem cell match that might let them directly address the polyps, a panacea gene therapy tailored to genetic aberrations—no one had an answer.

Least of all Delphine.
"I have a new assignment for you," Aldous announced the moment Delphine took a seat.

Delphine stiffened midway to easing against the chair's backrest. Nothing about today's meeting had forecasted the advent of any pivotal changes. Aldous lived and traveled according to a company schedule and speaking tour erratic enough to warrant them meeting odd days of the week and there'd been occasions when they’d met midday rather than after hours. The past few weeks had carried him absent from Toronto so that Delphine hadn't been surprised to be summoned so soon upon his return.

His words robbed the moisture from her mouth. Delphine swallowed to wet her throat. "But Jennifer —"

"You've done what you could," Aldous said, with a hint of unexpected tenderness. "In fact, you surpassed expectations. I heard Dr. Estrada remarked upon the rapport you built with your patient. You've become attached to Jennifer." His gaze assessed Delphine coolly. "I understand that. That's why I assure you that Jennifer will be made as comfortable as possible."

"There may—still be time for a breakthrough," Delphine murmured. "If we could pinpoint a treatment to stop the growths, we could turn her condition around completely."

"Yes," Aldous allowed warily, "there may be, and if there is and Dr. Estrada finds it, you can rest assured in the knowledge that you contributed greatly to the effort. For now, there are more important matters."

He picked up the folder at his elbow and handed it across the desk to her. Delphine clutched it for a moment, thoughts still with Jennifer, knowing the act of opening the folder marked a passage from ignorance to undeniable knowledge, from old assignment to the new.

"That," Aldous said, as Delphine delved into the dossier, "is Cosima Niehaus. You might recognize her as 324B21."

Paperclipped foremost to the scant sheaf of papers was a photograph. Delphine's eyes widened.

"Makes quite an impression doesn't she?" Aldous said, a smile hidden behind the bridge of his hands.

"The similarities between her and Jennifer aren't obvious immediately," Delphine agreed, staving off the pang of pity that sought to unstring her voice. To stand Cosima Niehaus beside Jennifer Fitzsimmons in the present would highlight more than differences in self-presentation choices. The prior months had wreaked devastation on the physique of the schoolteacher and athlete.

The suggestion of Aldous's smile stretched wider. "The dissimilarities don't stop there. Cosima is a scientist like ourselves. In fact, she'll be joining us here soon."

Delphine's head jerked up.

"To study herself."

Delphine's lips parted. "What?"

"Cosima—and a few other subjects—recently learned of their nature," Aldous explained, nonchalant. "She is self-aware."
Delphine's skin prickled. A chill or a thrill, she couldn't place.

"How?" Delphine managed at last, voicing the last of the questions in the series that leapt to mind.

"Unimportant," Aldous said. "That you know that she knows is enough."

"I don't understand," Delphine said carefully.

"I'm assigning you to be Cosima's monitor."

Delphine briefly forewent respiration.

"Her monitor," Delphine repeated evenly, recovering. "Like Greg is to Jennifer."

"In this context, you'll be more akin to Cosima's supervisor. She requires supervision." Aldous's eyes leveled on Delphine. "You understand that."

"You want me to... monitor her research."

Aldous cocked his head. "I want you to help her with her research." Surprise must have shown on Delphine's person. Aldous smiled. "We aren't necessarily at cross purposes with our subjects. There are topics, of course, that are best not broached or pursued, but when our goals align there's no reason we can't work together."

Apprehension simmered beneath Delphine's skin, unappeased by the frank manner in which Aldous watched her.

"What are... Cosima's goals?" Delphine asked, testing the name in her mouth.

"To study herself, her biology, no doubt in ways we are already studying her and her sisters. I'll trust your judgement in detecting any deviations."

"What exactly will my duties be as her monitor?" Delphine asked. She shifted her weight. "I'm not like Greg..."

"And Cosima isn't like Jennifer," Aldous parried. "A self-aware subject requires a different approach. Someone who knows what to expect and what to look for. You'll monitor her research, her health, her contacts—"

"Contacts? I don't expect that she will let a stranger read her messages and check her call history."

"Then don't be a stranger. Be her friend," Aldous said. "She's going to need one in these circumstances, don't you think?"

Delphine stared at him. Her mind fixated on Jennifer.

She hadn't been a friend to Jennifer.

What did Aldous mean by "be her friend"? Surely he didn't expect Delphine to show Cosima around the city, take her out for drinks, spend time together on the weekends.

Then again, maybe he did.

"What sort of arrangement do you have in mind?" Delphine asked quietly. "Having her here must present security risks."
"We plan to set her up in the old wing. In her own lab."

Delphine's eyebrows twitched. "Her own lab?"

Aldous smiled tightly. "One of the clauses of her employment agreement. She sees it as a concession, which is helpful for us. Placing her out of the way does make things easier. You'll be out of sight, able to conduct research without the inconvenience of interruptions, and you, not Cosima, will have overriding security clearance and access, as well as the right to review any acquisitions and personnel she wishes to bring in."

"Personnel? From outside DYAD?"

"If that's her wish. They'll also be subject to my approval," Aldous assured her. "Again, as per our agreement with Cosima."

Cosima.

Aldous used the name with the ease of familiarity.

Delphine crossed her legs at the knees. "Am I to understand that I should follow a policy of . . . placating her?"

Aldous laughed. Unbridled laughter. Actual delight. "I think you'll find the appearance of appeasement can go a long way toward smoothing relations."

"The carrot," Delphine murmured, recognizing Aldous's preferred strategy, "not the stick."

"Though you might be tempted to use the stick," Aldous said with an offhand nonchalance.

Delphine stared at Aldous, uncertain if she'd heard correctly.

Aldous continued blithely. "You and Cosima will be working on material along the lines of what you've been looking into. Cosima has already taken the liberty of examining her genome, no doubt first to verify that she and the others share identical DNA."

"Who are the others?"

Aldous shook his head. "Not your concern."

Delphine checked a frown. "If you are interested in her communications, it would be helpful to know what to look for and focus on."

Aldous studied her silently. "I take this to mean that you're committed, Delphine?"

Delphine almost laughed. "Is my work with Jennifer not enough indication?" For the first time during the meeting, Delphine leaned back in the seat. "I take it that those two are not meant to be friends?"

Aldous leaned forward, fingers interlaced, forearms on his desk. "Should that come to pass, who will be the helpful, kind friend who explains the situation?"

Delphine's jaw stiffened. They regarded each other.

Aldous leaned back. "If you take a moment to consider, you'll realize that you'll be helping Cosima. There's the matter of the disease, one—and our first priority will be to determine Cosima's status—and, two, if they're left unchecked, the clones may be in danger of exposing themselves. In which
case we may not be able to contain the situation or protect them from outside forces."

Delphine held herself still. "Which is why it would be helpful to know the identities of the others in question."

Aldous's brow formed a stern shelf. "What you need to know is that Cosima is your subject. Not any of the others."

Delphine briefly broke eye contact. When she looked back, Aldous continued, in a lighter tone, as if wielding the generosity of forgiveness.

"Cosima is scheduled for orientation tomorrow. You'll meet her here, in my office, at one."

"In the afternoon?"

Aldous smiled. "Cosima's not much of a morning person."

Not like Jennifer.

Because Cosima wasn't Jennifer.

* *

The height of activity in the room reserved for "J.F." was the steady output on the heart monitor. The lines climbed and plummeted heights greater than the barely discernible rise and fall of the chest beneath the thin blanket. It was just Jennifer and Delphine and the pervasive hush, courtesy of the nurses' intelligence that reported Greg absent (according to one, returned home to shower) and that Jennifer rested asleep. Out of habit and for the appearance of purpose—for her own ease rather than the benefit of anyone present—Delphine picked up Jennifer's chart.

It told her Jennifer wasn't improving. That the alarming dip in numbers that had made them defer the last round of treatment hadn't risen. Jennifer was holding steady—but not where they wanted her to.

Delphine replaced the chart listlessly. None of it was surprising. None of it was even new to Delphine. She had reviewed the latest results that morning when they'd been emailed to her.

Delphine slipped her hands into the pockets of her white coat and stared at the lumps in the blanket that were Jennifer's feet.

She hadn't come here to see the charts.

Delphine took a deep breath.

"I'm being reassigned," she said, at the volume of a whisper, because they were alone and Jennifer was unconscious. "I didn't know and . . . I don't have a choice. I begin tomorrow. But I believe I'll be doing similar work." She sucked in her lips. "I'm going to keep looking. For something that might help. For a cure. So for now . . ."

Delphine nodded to herself.

"À la prochaine."

* *

With Delphine's watch reporting twenty minutes to one when she stepped onto Aldous's floor, she slowed to see through the glass wall that Aldous already entertained company.
Delphine turned to Aldous's secretary. "How long have they been in there?"

The woman gave a little start at the sharpness in Delphine's tone. "Maybe ten minutes?"

Delphine softened the delivery of her next question. "What time was the appointment?"

The woman shook her head. "There was no appointment."

"I'm sorry?" Delphine said.

"Dr. Leekie cleared his schedule for today." The secretary indicated the door. "He said you were to go in when you arrived."

No appointment. Delphine had made the conscious effort to arrive early, in the event that Aldous felt the need to provide further briefing before meeting Cosima—together, she presumed, with Aldous. But it wasn't Cosima walking into a meeting—it was Delphine.

She felt ambushed.

Aldous.

Shaking her head, Delphine pushed her way inside. Aldous smiled in her direction, which redirected the gaze of the room's other occupant, who twisted in her chair.

"Ah, here comes Dr. Cormier," Aldous announced. "Cosima, this is Dr. Delphine Cormier."

Delphine smiled past her irritation and approached the chair Cosima was seated in, extending a hand. The sight of Cosima wasn't overwhelmingly startling, having met Jennifer and seen the photograph, but there was something doubtless fascinating in beholding a personality and bearing so unlike what Delphine had been exposed to for the past few months. The dreadlocks were the obvious deviation, but even accessories as simple as the multitude of bracelets and rings and Cosima's glasses lent her a completely different air.

Certainly that smile, part canine-flashing smirk, held barbs that placed Delphine on the edge of wariness.

"The two of you will be working closely," Aldous continued. "Dr. Cormier will be your supervisor."

Cosima's eyebrows lifted. As they relaxed, her mouth stretched in one direction. Without getting up, Cosima placed her hand in Delphine's and gazed up at her with that tight expression. Delphine noted the impressive dedication Cosima had to eyeliner. They shook hands.

"Enchantée," Delphine said.

Cosima's smile blossomed into a full-blown grin.

Delphine relaxed her grip.

Cosima didn't. She held onto Delphine's hand and glanced at Aldous.

"Is this for real?" Cosima asked him. The voice was Jennifer's but not Jennifer's, the accent similar, but placed in a slightly different register, tone all disparagement.

Aldous peered back at Cosima unperturbed.

Cosima turned to Delphine. "How long have you been working here? Is today your first day?"
"I'm sorry?" Delphine asked.

"Dr. Cormier holds a PhD in immunology," explained Aldous. "She's a talented researcher with . . . experience in your particular field. She'll also be your primary physician and will be overseeing all your medical exams and arrangements."

"Seriously?" Cosima said, but with less of an edge and a portion of unalloyed surprise. "You have an MD and a PhD? How old are you? Did you defend your dissertation yesterday?"

Delphine blinked at her, robbed of a response.

"Dr. Cormier has been with us for some time," Aldous soothed.

"Right," drawled Cosima. "She has experience in 'my' particular field." She dropped Delphine's hand abruptly and slouched sideways in the chair to view Delphine from a better vantage. "So you've worked with clones."

Delphine and Aldous both paused.

Cosima looked between the both of them. "Is that not a topic you're comfortable with?" She sought out Delphine's eyes. "Because I've got bad news for you . . ."

"Obviously you're part of a high-security program," Aldous intervened, "one that is almost entirely compartmentalized."

"Ah. Compartmentalized. Which I assume is to keep smart people from knowing what they're working on. But she knows," Cosima pointed out, eyes unwavering from Delphine.

"As do you," Delphine responded softly.

Cosima's lips stretched slowly in a smile. "Yeah. But my knowing gets a special name: self-awareness. What's your story?"

"The same as yours," Delphine said, holding Cosima's gaze. "Curiosity."

A grin stole slowly and revealingly across Cosima's mouth. Delphine expected another sally, but after a moment of merely maintaining eye contact Cosima swiveled to look at Aldous. "You mentioned a tour?"

The tour wasn't comprehensive—a visit to the inpatient care ward housing Jennifer Fitzsimmons was omitted from the itinerary—but it was no less impressive or amazing for any exclusions. At least, it was as far as Delphine experienced the rounds.

Aldous led the way, Cosima kept pace half a step behind, and lagging as the tail trailed Delphine. Aldous regaled them with facts about the state-of-the-art facilities, milestones in the company’s history, achievements of its notable personnel, impacts and contributions in current fields of study, the multinational scope and reach, and probably could have recited the cafeteria’s menu if pressed, as if Cosima were an investor with an interest in DYAD's stock.

Cosima listened.

And criticized.

No sector seemed without a shadow cast by the spotlight of Aldous's glowing praise.
Remarks ranged from the fairly innocuous—implications of whispers of questionable ties to questionable communities—to the conspiratorial—oblique suggestions of past government contracts and dealings—to borderline criminal accusations—"I thought I read somewhere that the subjects of that hepatitis trial were unknowingly infected . . . and then were never seen or heard from again?"

As the tour wound down, ambling into the old wing—"Where we house our most sensitive research." "Like when you were sterilizing lunatics in the '30s?"—Delphine had formed several impressions of Cosima Niehaus:

Cosima did her research, a trawler who ranged far and dug deep, and she was confident in her knowledge and a butcher in wielding it as a sharpened edge.

Her hands argued as vigorously as her tongue, almost distractingly in their emphasis.

She was impertinent and Aldous's figure and status held no impression on her.

She was bold or reckless or arrogant in her dismissiveness.

She took no great pleasure in the prospect of working with them: She declared the final room Aldous ushered them into "clone jail."

Looking around, Delphine didn't blame her, though the comparison to a community college facility seemed a bit unfair—Delphine would credit a community college to at least maintain its facilities as clean and orderly. The space in the old wing resembled a storage closet where artifacts of a bygone science age had been left to gather dust. It felt forgotten, obsolete, as Cosima and Delphine would be stranded in isolation from the main building. The suddenness of her reassignment that had struck Delphine before echoed in the lack of the room's preparation.

The sight of a bucket and mop spurred another thought: Maybe janitorial services hadn't been an option and wouldn't be. This was to be a restricted laboratory with a very particular occupant gathering and conducting very proprietary research.

Would they ask a clone to tidy for herself?

They were asking her to study herself.

While Delphine was lost in thought and Aldous expounded on the wonders of DYAD's resources, Cosima snuck glances at Delphine. Delphine gave no sign of noticing. The story of emailing a vaccine to a colleague in Delhi where it was printed out on a biological 3D printer made Delphine nod along absent in corroboration—it was well within the range of DYAD's resources and capabilities. Such opportunities had attracted Delphine herself to DYAD's doorstep.

Cosima caught Delphine's gesture.

"That is . . . completely incredible," Cosima allowed.

Aldous pressed the fleeting advantage and took Cosima by the shoulders. "Please, make a list—equipment, personnel—just . . . blue sky a little. Dr. Cormier will coordinate and ensure you get everything you need."

Cosima looked to Delphine. Their eyes met. Delphine nodded.

Cosima turned to Aldous. "When do we start?"
With a fingertip Delphine traced a line through the dust settled upon the steel tabletop and smiled grimly at her charge. "It'll take a little work."

From the other side of the room Cosima crossed her arms and simply regarded Delphine. Stark fashion differences aside—and the striking aesthetic for a scientist altogether—Delphine tried to imagine Jennifer taking up the same canted pose, sass exuding from one extended boot all the way up the leggings past the thrust hip to the dangling dreadlocks, and failed. Jennifer had come to them overwhelmed into a sense of gratitude and awe. Cosima was already at the finish line of unimpressed.

Maybe this wasn't a reset.

"So . . . 'supervisor," Cosima said. "Is that what they're calling it now?"

"Calling what?" Delphine asked as she took a turn around the space that would be a future functioning laboratory.

"Monitors."

Cosima delivered the bomb well, throwing the designation out so casually and frankly that Delphine knew Cosima read the answer in the stutter of her step.

"Got it. Wanted to make sure that we're all on the same page. Do you prefer Dr. Cormier?" Cosima asked as Delphine wrangled her disarray of thoughts.

"That's fine," Delphine managed evenly. "So is Delphine."

"Fine," Cosima muttered, head bobbing, taking up a pace to match Delphine's so that they circled the lab facing opposite one another. "Is the PhD, MD thing real?"

Delphine nodded. "Yes."

"And Delphine Cormier is your actual name?"

Delphine stopped beside the sink. "Is this an interrogation?"

"Hey." Cosima spread her hands, strolling onwards and away from Delphine. "I figure you know way more about me than I do about you. I'm just trying to even the playing field. It's kinda surprising, though, you using your real name—it is your real name, right?" Cosima waved Delphine off. "You don't have to answer, I'll find out soon."

Delphine puzzled on her words, then nodded. "Your grasp of DYAD history is impressive."

"Pretty interesting stuff," drawled Cosima with a glance back over her shoulder. "But it's what's outside of public knowledge that's tantalizing, right? That's the real frontier of science—so far out that no one actually sees it. Like us, stuck here. Cut off from the rest of the building."

Delphine nodded, seeing no point in disagreeing, and approached the nearest table. "But it also affords a degree of freedom."

"Lack of oversight will do that," Cosima said. "Except in my case, there's you."

"I'm not going to stand around doing nothing," Delphine said, resisting the urge to cross her arms. "I'll be working with you, doing research."

Cosima's eyes narrowed on Delphine. "What is it, exactly, that you've worked on? What do you
think you and I are going to be doing here?"

Delphine blew out a measured breath. "I understand that you are here to . . . study yourself. As a
physician—your physician—my first priority is your health." Cosima's jaw flexed. "While we get the
lab equipped—which will be after you determine the equipment that will go in it, so that's likely our
first order of business—we'll conduct a full physical."

Cosima studied her for the span of several breaths. "You know about Katja."

The name stunned Delphine. Before she could consult better judgement, she blurted, "You know
about Katja?"

Doubt and confusion cracked Cosima's expression.

The electronic lock on the door sounded, drawing their confused attention. The door opened.

The figure that stepped inside flummoxed them both.

"Hello," the smartly dressed blonde said. "Rachel Duncan."

Delphine let herself into Aldous's office the moment she registered he was inside.

"I was just thrown out of that lab—by Rachel Duncan."

Aldous's lips parted.

Delphine suppressed the urge to shake her head.

So many pieces of the picture she couldn't see.

"You could have warned me," Delphine accused Aldous, voice tight but just short of snapping. She
even checked herself from throwing down onto his desk the nondisclosure form that Rachel Duncan
had handed her in dismissal. "About Rachel Duncan, at least."

"Not telling you about Rachel might have been an oversight, but I didn't expect her to pay Cosima a
visit like this. As for the rest, if I had warned you," Aldous said, "your reaction wouldn't have been
genuine."

Delphine paced a tight line in front of Aldous's desk. "What do you mean?"

"Cosima's more likely to be less guarded around you now that she has a sense that she threw you off
balance," Aldous said, eyes calmly tracking Delphine's movements.

"You knew she would," Delphine muttered, incredulous. "And she did. You said she was self-
aware, but you didn't let on how much she knew." She ran a hand through her hair. "Why is she so
angry? It's not just distrust, it's . . ."

Disgust.

Aldous steepled his hands. "She and the others know about their monitors. Among other things,
Cosima had a rather . . . unfortunate falling out with hers."

Delphine made another turn at the corner of Aldous's desk, stopped, and braced herself against the
edge. She tipped her head back and released a heavy breath to settle her amped nerves. Crossing her
arms, she confronted Aldous. "This giving me information piece-by-piece isn't going to work, Aldous. I feel like I barely know anything about her or this situation and that somehow she knows more than I do. Please, just . . . explain."

Aldous reclined in his chair. "Cosima is coming to us from the University of Minnesota, but before that she was pursuing a doctoral program at Berkeley. There she met a woman who became her girlfriend."

"Girlfriend?" Delphine echoed, straightening up. "As in lover?"

Aldous raised his eyebrows at her. "Does that bother you?"

Delphine swallowed a laugh. "No. But it gives me questions."

Aldous nodded. "That aspect of her case has been of interest to us."

Delphine filed away the questions of sexuality and genetic determination and focused on the topic at hand, mainly: that DYAD exploited the knowledge. "This girlfriend was her monitor?"

"Yes." Aldous made a sound like a sigh. "A rather headstrong one. Cosima broke off the relationship when she transferred into the program at the University of Minnesota, but her monitor attempted to follow her."

"Why?" Delphine wondered.

Aldous shrugged.

"You didn't try to stop her?" Delphine asked.

"I didn't know her plans. I dismissed her in Berkeley when Cosima made her decision known, but she had her own ideas. As it turned out, Cosima didn't agree very much with those ideas either. We did get valuable information from her at the last, but it came at the cost of exposure. Cosima didn't take kindly to breaking and entering and there was a . . . confrontation. Her monitor—ex-monitor—came to us, worried, and as far as I can tell, their fight propelled Cosima to come to Toronto."

Delphine's brow creased. "I don't see the connection. How is Cosima self-aware? You said that monitors are kept in ignorance. Was this one an exception? Did she learn about her nature during their fight?"

Aldous shook his head. "No. Cosima was contacted by other self-aware subjects. When we began to suspect that was the case, it became crucial to determine the lines of communication."

"That's why you want me to monitor her communications? To determine her contacts among the subjects?"

"Not necessarily. We know who contacted her, though if any others put in appearances, we'll of course need to know," Aldous said. "What remains murky is what Cosima's motivations are in being here."

Delphine's eyebrows furrowed. "What do you mean?"

"Would you say that Cosima trusts us?"

Delphine didn't hesitate. "No."

Aldous nodded. "We've struck an uneasy arrangement with her. She has genuine curiosity and, I
think, the talent to pursue it. It's a shame, really, that the doors opened between us in these
circumstances. I think she would fit in here very well if she could let go of her cynicism and
paranoia. But with her in that state of mind, we can't predict what Cosima will do with anything she
finds."

For a second Delphine was of two minds: A part of her saw what Aldous saw, the wonder of a clone
subject coming to study herself after being raised and kept ignorant of the truth, inexorably arriving
full circle in an elegant orchestration set in motion years before her conception.

The other part snagged on the cynicism. Delphine could still feel the sting of Jennifer's decline into
hopelessness—and Jennifer hadn't held a fraction of the truth.

"Where is her . . . previous monitor now?" Delphine asked.

"Out of the picture. But I do have her notes from her time with Cosima, if you're interested."

Now he was offering them.

Delphine moved onto the next pressing subject. "Who is Rachel Duncan?"

Aldous looked slightly uncomfortable. "You saw her."

Delphine nodded. Hard to forget. "A subject. Self-aware, clearly. Where did she come from?"

Rachel had behaved as if she'd found them loitering in her office.

"Rachel . . . is a ward of DYAD," Aldous said carefully. "As such, and unlike her sisters, she has
always been self-aware. She was . . . raised within the company. And now she has a place within it
as an employee. With this recent development, you can understand she's taken a personal interest."

Delphine gaped at Aldous. "You didn't think to tell me this?" She shook her head. "No. I know why.
Not my concern."

"Rachel concentrated her studies and energies mostly in the company's overseas interests until
recently. While she is a known face and entity within the company, you understand not many are
privy to her true identity. It's a security issue, Delphine."

Delphine tapped the nondisclosure agreement against her side. A security issue. And a legal one.

"Will we be working with her?"

"Not in the day-to-day. Rachel is in business relations."

And her visit today with Cosima had simply been a welcome from one clone sibling to another?
Rachel had made it a point to dismiss Delphine with such immediacy that a word hadn't passed
between Cosima and Rachel before Delphine had closed the door behind herself.

"So if . . . Ms. Duncan requests something of me, I should give it to her?"

"Run it by me first," Aldous amended.

Interesting.

Delphine hoped Rachel didn't ask anything of her.

"Does she have a monitor?" Delphine wondered.
"Rachel isn't your subject," Aldous dismissed the question casually. "Then to return to my subject," Delphine followed along, "may I know the names of the other subjects who are in contact with her?"

Aldous loosed a burdened breath. After some consideration, he said, "One is Alison Hendrix, a stay-at-home mother—"

"Mother?" interjected Delphine. "I understood the clones are sterile?"

"Her children are adopted," Aldous said. "The other is a Sarah Manning. Also a mother." Aldous tapped the desktop. "Her child isn't adopted."

Delphine absorbed the news. "How?"

Aldous raised his eyebrows. "Million dollar question."

"You haven't brought her in for examination?"

Aldous chuckled darkly. "Like your Cosima, Sarah Manning has . . . an independent streak. We approached all three when we discovered they'd become self-aware. Alison agreed to our terms for a mutually beneficial relationship moving forward, Cosima has come into our employment, but Sarah . . .

"Sarah continues to distinguish herself from the others."

"They were working together to investigate themselves?" Delphine asked.

"Correct. It's not certain that arrangement is past tense."

"You think Cosima is here to be . . . an inside man? To what end?"

"Keep an eye on her," Aldous instructed.

"But," Delphine objected, "if that were the case, why wouldn't she . . . play nice? Cooperate and win our trust?"

Aldous chuckled. "Maybe she needs a good example to follow. Feel free to show her."

*

To Shay [18:30]: I need a drink.
From Shay [18:32]: Oh no. Ur not looking at bottles of whiskey again, r u? Tmrw is a work day.
From Shay [18:33]: K. That's allowed. Want to come over? Making dinner. Do u like eggplant?
To Shay [18:34]: Not if it's any trouble.
From Shay [18:34]: No trouble.
To Shay [18:35]: Okay. Thank you. What about cake?
From Shay [18:36]: Oooooo. How do u feel ab pie? Like apple pie. & ice cream??????
To Shay [18:36]: I'll see what I can do. But no guarantees.

*

"Mmmmm," Shay hummed around the combination of liquefied sugar, cinnamon, buttery crust, apples, and creamy vanilla mixing in her mouth.
"Really?" Delphine asked from beside her at the kitchen table.

"I've been craving pie," Shay said. "You have no idea. This absolutely hits the spot."

"It's much more difficult to find a bakery that makes pies than I thought it would be," Delphine said. "I wasn't sure if one from just any market would be very good."

"It's fine," Shay assured her. "It's more than fine. Like I said, I was craving pie, but I didn't have an excuse to get one. If it's just for me, it's too much, but if I have someone to share it with . . ."

"I hope you don't expect me to take home the leftovers," Delphine warned.

"When have you ever taken home leftovers?" Shay pointed out. "I still have that bottle of whiskey."

"I'm working on it," Delphine said, lifting up her tumbler. "You'll notice I did not bring wine tonight."

"I did notice, thank you," Shay said. "I was starting to wonder if you noticed that you've been creating a reserve in my kitchen."

"It wouldn't be a reserve if you drank it. You don't have to wait for me to open a bottle. They are for you to enjoy."

"No, I do have to wait for you," insisted Shay. "I like the idea of holding you responsible for your actions."

"What actions?" demanded Delphine. "Bringing gifts as a guest?"

"Yes, exactly," teased Shay.

"Is this a cultural thing I don't know about? Is it wrong to bring gifts when you visit in Canada? Or is this some sort of Canadian resentment? Should I return the pie?"

Shay laughed. "No! It's too late for the pie. They won't take it back now. And I asked for it, so it's different—you did me a favor."

"Okay, but that doesn't explain this resentment. Canadians have a reputation for being nice, polite people. I did not expect this."

"Don't hold me up as a representative of all Canadians," cautioned Shay. "It's not valid. And it's not resentment, it's just, you know . . ."

"No?" Delphine hedged, entirely confused.

"I don't want you to feel obligated," Shay said. "Like you have to bring something every time you come over."

Delphine smiled in a manner that radiated suppressed laughter. "I don't. But now I might develop a complex about it." Her gaze darted to Shay's plate. "Your ice cream is melting."

Shay rolled her eyes.

When they cleared their plates and pushed them aside to center the remaining alcohol in their glasses, Shay said, "There's something I want to give you."

Delphine's eyebrows rose. "It's not three-fourths of an apple pie and several bottles of wine, is it?"
"Keep it up and it will be," Shay warned, wagging a finger. "Wait here."

She moved to the side table near the bed and opened the drawer. Tucked into the corner was a small stack of business cards. Shay plucked them out and returned to the table. Instead of retaking her seat, she inserted herself between the empty chair and Delphine seated closer to the wall. Standing by her guest, Shay handed the cards to Delphine.

"What's this?" Delphine asked as she glanced through them.

"Reputable counselors and therapists here in the city," Shay said lowly. Delphine looked up sharply into her face. "Some I looked into myself. Others were referred to me."

Delphine sat quiet.

"When I moved," Shay continued, "I made sure that if I was ever in crisis, I'd have a plan, a place to go," Shay paused. "If you need to talk to someone, you would have doctor-patient confidentially with any of these people."

Delphine studied her.

Shay eased back onto her stool, sitting on it sideways to face Delphine so that she had one hand braced upon the table and the other slung on the back of the chair.

"I'm not pushing you out the door—or into any doors," Shay said quickly. "I'm here for you. I'm just . . ."

Delphine's features softened. "Worried."

Shay nodded. "I want you to know there are options if it—if it gets overwhelming. It just seems like the past few months—"

Delphine grasped her hand. "I understand. Thank you."

Shay tried a tentative smile. Delphine's answering smile revealed dimples.

Her thumb traced over Shay's knuckles.

"It's sad but ice cream isn't always a cure," Shay said, to lighten the mood.

"Do you mean whiskey?" Delphine asked, tone self-deprecating.

"Or that," Shay agreed.

"You're right," Delphine said, eyes conducting a leisurely sweep over Shay's face. "But I already knew it wasn't the whiskey that would make me feel better," Delphine's fingers squeezed and released Shay. "Thank you. I'll save these, keep them—" Her lips pulled in one direction. "—in reserve."
Day two of Delphine's reassignment dawned with the somewhat embarrassing realization that she hadn't secured Cosima's contact information before the unexpected interruption of Rachel Duncan and that Cosima hadn't provided it in her forms. Delphine informed front desk security to contact her upon Cosima's arrival and spent an entire morning's wait discovering the mop and bucket in the laboratory in the old wing was really quite possibly meant for their use.

By late morning, muscles warmed by exertion and still alone, it was a bit dismaying how much remained in want of clearing or attention with a rag.

Abandoning the endeavor, Delphine unpacked her laptop on a clean table surface and tested the lab's connectivity. The Wi-Fi icon displayed a weak signal. She checked a few emails, made a few inquiries, and determined she was not only going to be supervisor to DYAD's newest human resource, but administrator of the old wing. The sector wasn't on anyone's radar as active. She arranged for cleaning services to pay a visit and I.T. to bring the laboratory into the 21st century. Eyeing the ticking time, she scheduled an MRI and other scans and tests with the appropriate labs that would bring Cosima's records up to complete and updated.

The jingle of her ring tone disturbed a round of online window shopping.

"Hello, Dr. Cormier. This is front desk security. Ms. Niehaus just arrived. She's on her way over."

A short wait later the electronic lock pad announced Cosima's arrival. She sauntered inside and raised her eyebrows.

"Good morning," Delphine greeted her. "Come join me."

"It's not just my imagination that this place is slightly cleaner than it was yesterday, right?" Cosima asked as she unloaded her bag onto the end of the table. "Did the cleaning staff have a go, then give it up as hopeless?" She eyed Delphine. "Or was it you?"

"It'll be taken care of," Delphine assured her. She waved Cosima over. "Come help me brainstorm ideas for equipment the lab will need."

"You get straight to business, Dr. Cormier," Cosima observed warily.

"I didn't know when you would arrive," Delphine said casually. "My day started a little earlier."

"Yeah, about that," Cosima said, bowing her head, looking a little sheepish. "I'm, uh, always kinda late, so, uh, always kinda sorry."

"I'm usually here by nine, nine-thirty," Delphine replied as a means of not offering commentary.

"Yeah," drawled Cosima as she dragged a chair over, "I'm more of a night owl. Nine, nine-thirty sounds like the time at night I start to get going."

Well. If those were the lab hours Cosima expected to pull, they were at least comparable to the lengths Delphine had given to Aldous.

"In that case, it would be a good idea to have a way to contact you so we can coordinate," suggested Delphine.
"Coordinate. Right," Cosima said. "I'm getting a company email address, yeah?"

"Your phone number, please," Delphine demanded directly.

"My phone number. You can just ask me out to dinner in person, Dr. Cormier."

"We can get dinner, if we can manage to complete some work," Delphine replied offhandedly. She realized belatedly by the intensity of Cosima's scrutiny that the remark was a test of some sort.

"Like a treat," Cosima said with exaggerated enunciation. "Good dog, here's your reward."

Delphine chose silence as her best option and held her phone at the ready. Cosima recited a string of numbers, Delphine saved it and hit call. From the direction of Cosima's bag sounded a muffled ringtone.

"And now you have my number if you need to contact me," Delphine told her.

"Any restrictions?" Cosima asked, angling back in her chair. "Can I call you if I, like, run out of milk or something?"

"You can," Delphine confirmed breezily. "That is, you now have the ability to. But I can't guarantee I'll do anything about your milk supply."

"What if I need supervision buying milk?"

"I can look into protective services if you need constant accompaniment," Delphine said.

"You mean you're not protective services?" Cosima wondered. "I'm a little disappointed."

"Well, here's something that hopefully won't disappoint: Dr. Leekie has more or less given you carte blanche to furnish the laboratory. What equipment would you like in here?"

"I guess it depends what we need. You think any of this junk can be salvaged?" Cosima wondered skeptically. She indicated the fume hood with her chin. "What are the chances the extractor fan in that thing works?"

Delphine checked a tic of a grin. "If it doesn't, we'll get it fixed." She slid her open notebook toward Cosima. "I have a few suggestions."

"That's more than a few," Cosima remarked as she leaned forward to look. She reviewed the list, debated a few selections, suggested one or two brands, and rounded out the necessaries.

"Anything else?" Delphine asked as she jotted down the last item.

"Chill zone, probably over there," Cosima said, waving in the direction of the corner opposite the door that featured a raised dais.

"Chill zone?" Delphine asked with a smile.

"Yeah, like a couch, snack center, tea station, a nice Persian rug—"


Cosima raised an eyebrow. "Sky's the limit, right?"

Delphine nodded, smile lingering. "Okay. I'll look into it."
She made a point to add "Persian rug" to the list. The tardiness Delphine could do without, but Cosima wasn't a laggard. Delphine had somewhat dreaded determining what equipment to order would be like pulling teeth, but Cosima proved a pleasant surprise in the opposite direction. Delphine might have even called her display efficient. Tucking the pen between the pages, Delphine closed the notebook. "It will take time to fulfill all these requests. Which gives us time to fit in a physical."

Cosima considered her for a length of time. "Did you plan all this in the morning or is this the standard welcome for all self-aware clones?"

"It's very important that we monitor your health," Delphine said.

Cosima's jaw stiffened and flexed. "Right. That's why you guys conducted all those clandestine nighttime examinations." Her eyes narrowed. "Were you a part of that operation?"

Delphine shook her head. "No."

"But you know what I'm talking about," Cosima remarked.

They sat mulishly studying one another across the table. Cosima's ploy was deftly sprung and the more they traded nuggets of veiled information, the more Delphine understood Jennifer hadn't prepared her for this sort of game and its wages. One of her exes had gotten caught up in a poker craze after seeing a movie with one of his friends. He delved into a variant he called Texas Hold'em, but hosted games that featured other styles of play. She felt like she and Cosima were engaged in one of those, where players were dealt a series of cards shown face up and others face down and she and Cosima were jockeying to see the other's hidden hand.

As the silence stretched, Cosima's respiration grew discernibly heavier. A niggle of doubt took up residence in Delphine's gut.

"All this urgency," Cosima said at last, "is it because of Katja?"

Delphine hesitated.

Cosima studied Delphine intently. "You're worried that maybe all of us are—" She waved a hand. "—predisposed?"

"You know as well as I do that it's a possibility," Delphine said softly.

"Well," Cosima said, turning away to gaze toward the windows, "I'll spare you the suspense and tell you what the tests will say: I'm sick."

* *

There was perhaps a minute in which Delphine had no cognizance of whether she or Cosima said anything.

* *

Words pierced the muted bubble:

"You okay, Doctor? You're looking a little pale."

Their meaning and the scrutiny Cosima was exercising on her face took time to arrange into sense. Delphine breathed in deeply, then out slowly, inhaled and exhaled again as perception and reception rearranged themselves. "What makes you think you are sick?"
"The coughing up blood bit was a pretty good giveaway." Cosima said it flatly but a tremble shuddered through her lower lip and a bright sheen lay over her eyes.

"How long have you known?" Delphine asked softly. "When did the symptoms start?"

Cosima blinked slowly. "A few days ago."

Delphine absorbed the revelation.

"What?" Cosima demanded.

Delphine met Cosima's eyes. "Is that why you came to the DYAD?"

Cosima's lips pressed together. She seemed to conduct a debate with herself. She glanced away, then back. "If what happened to Katja is happening to me, if this is something that's affecting us because we're clones, then I need to be in the place that knows us inside and out." Cosima leaned forward. "And that's here, with you guys. Right?"

Delphine sucked in her lips. "Then let's begin immediately. Your medical records are not up-to-date. Can we correct that?"

Brown eyes searched Delphine's intently.

"Please?" entreated Delphine.

Cosima breathed out slowly. She nodded.

The blood tests, the scans, and the paper tissues that Cosima speckled with blood through heaving coughs over the next few days confirmed what Cosima knew: She was sick. The symptoms were what Cosima had heard afflicted Katja.

It looked the same as what wrought Jennifer bedridden.

With evidence amassed in hand, Delphine went to Aldous. Delphine skipped the preamble and set the folder before Aldous. "Cosima is showing the same symptoms as the other two."

Aldous's features slackened. For the first time Delphine watched the implications cascade through his comprehension. With the number of cases beginning to cluster within the given frame of time, he was wondering, like Delphine, if they were looking at an epidemic to Project Leda.

Delphine sucked at her lips. "I might as well have remained with Jennifer."

Aldous's expression closed. Delphine peered at him closely, disquiet rising beneath her skin.

"What is it?" she asked.

"There's been a turn in Jennifer's case," Aldous intoned in a low voice. "Last night. She's slipped into a coma."

They stared at each other. Pressure gathered and grew and expanded within Delphine's skull.

"What will be done for Jennifer moving forward?"

Aldous folded his hands upon the desk. "In your professional opinion, what do you think can be
done, Dr. Cormier?"

Delphine gazed at him in bullish silence. She didn't have an answer. She hadn't had an answer for months. The thought occurred to Delphine that they could make Jennifer's passing easy. But DYAD wouldn't want that. They'd want nature to run its course. To observe. To dissect.

As a case study.

They weren't wrong. The information would be valuable moving forward.

It was Delphine who'd grown ambivalent.

"I think Cosima should be informed about Jennifer," Delphine proposed. "She already knows there was another subject that was ill—Katja. This is why she came here. She began to exhibit symptoms and she thought we might have the answers."

"Do we?" Aldous challenged her.

"We better find them," Delphine said, voice tight, "for her sake. This is the biology she came to study."

"Or perhaps just the foremost part," Aldous pointed out.

"In this our goals align with hers," Delphine retorted. "She already knows other clones exist. If we volunteer information to her freely and unprompted, it would be a sign that we trust her and want to work with her, openly." Delphine crossed her arms. "She came to us paranoid, but that doesn't mean she can't be won over."

Aldous hitched an eyebrow at her. "Are you proposing you can win her over?"

"I'm only saying it's a possibility. Possibilities are what drew me to the DYAD."

Aldous regarded her shrewdly. "Tread carefully, Delphine. Mind where your sympathies lie."

"Cosima's already far more invested than we knew. This isn't just her biology; it's her life."

"And I won't bar you from sharing what we've learned from Jennifer's case, but knowing about Jennifer specifically would contribute how?"

"It will give her a sense of urgency," Delphine said softly.

Aldous's forehead wrinkled with the ascent of his eyebrows. "Or send her packing."

"Where would she go?" Delphine wondered.

Aldous cocked his head. "That might be interesting to find out as well."

Delphine hesitated. "So I have your permission?"

Aldous shook his head. "No. You don't."

The brush veered slowly from its preliminarily straight trajectory to smear red all over Delphine's skin. Delphine chuckled. "You are . . . not very good at this."
"Oh, and you are?" Shay fired back as she swiped and dabbed at her mistake with her thumb. She managed to coat herself in as much red as she'd painted onto Delphine.

"I wouldn't know. I leave it to the professionals," Delphine said frankly.

Shay moved onto the next nail, smiling to herself. "Don't worry, I won't make you walk out of here looking like a kindergartner went all arts and crafts on you. I just wanted to see what this color would look like on you."

"How does it look?" Delphine asked.

The fire engine red popped against Delphine's complexion.

"Fantastic," Shay declared flatly. "No surprise."

Delphine laughed. Shay lightly tapped the back of her hand. "Sit still."

Delphine obeyed. "I don't recall seeing you wear this color before."

"Because I don't wear it. It was an impulse buy. I just happened to be in one of those moods when I was shopping that day, you know when you think you want a change. I thought I would wear it, but I like darker reds better."

"As do I," agreed Delphine. "This is not a color I would choose for myself."

"Yeah? Why not? You can pull it off."

"I think there is an English word. It's... garish?"

The laugh that overtook Shay threatened to spill polish. Wrestling her giggles under control, Shay said, "That's definitely a word that exists in the English language. Yes, this color is bright. Okay, sit still and let that dry a little bit before I put on a second coat."

"Another one?" Delphine protested. "On only one finger?"

"I'm only going to do one finger—just so we can see the true color. I'll take it off afterward, I promise. Weren't you the one who said you wanted to do something that required minimal thinking?"

"I did," admitted Delphine, "though I was thinking more along the lines of a film. But you don't have a television and you get shy when I invite you to my apartment."

"Shy" was a liberal word choice. Reluctant was closer to the truth. Delphine had extended a few couched invitations. Shay had yet to take her up on one. It helped that Delphine's invitations tended to be spontaneous rather than proposals for sometime in the future; Shay didn't hesitate to adopt the appearance of short notice to justify compromises of closer, more neutral locations to meet.

Neither did Delphine press. Delphine hadn't even made the offer tonight. But Delphine had noticed Shay's noncommittal responses, clearly. What Delphine deduced from the observation or to what she attributed the avoidance Shay had no idea.

For Shay herself the source of uneasiness remained elusive. It wasn't Delphine. Not exactly. Shay was comfortable with Delphine's presence in the studio. Having Delphine there was an allocation and adjustment to which Shay had consciously submitted. That they met in her own home afforded a sense of control, that it was her space, her rules, on her terms.

It might be different in Delphine's domain.
"Yeah?" Shay asked. She blew lightly on Delphine's nail. Delphine wiggled her fingers. "What were you in the mood to watch?"

"You could have chosen," Delphine said, "as my guest."

Shay grinned to herself. "You'd watch a romcom with me?"

"That . . . would indeed require minimal thinking," Delphine afforded.

Shay chuckled. "Do you really find romcoms that uninteresting or is that a front you put on?"

Delphine raised her eyebrows. "You think I put on fronts?"

"Sometimes," Shay said softly, unscrewing the brush top of the bottle of polish, "I think you protest more passionately than you actually feel."

"Why would I do that?" Delphine asked, hand submitted limply to Shay's ministrations.

"I don't know," Shay allowed, sweeping a fresh layer atop Delphine's index finger, bringing out the true candy red of the color. "To see what kind of reaction you'll get?"

"From you?" Delphine wondered.

"I guess. I've only ever seen you talk to me."

Delphine lifted her index finger when Shay finished applying the second coat and sucked in her breath. "Garish."

"It doesn't look bad," Shay assured her, "but you'd have to be comfortable wearing it."

"I'm curious to see it on you," Delphine said.

Shay shook her head. "It appears just as bright on me as it does on you."

"But maybe you would wear it better," Delphine pressed, a warble of something strange in her tone. Confusion tugged the corners of Shay's mouth down. Exasperation deepened her expression into a frown.

"Are you trying to push the point because I made that comment?"

Delphine smiled.

"Okay, seriously," Shay said, twisting the cap with unnecessary force to screw it closed tight, "do you actually say things to get under my skin?"

"I don't know," Delphine said. "That is, I don't know if I do it consciously." She gave her hand a little shake. "At least, not when I'm not purposefully teasing you."

Shay flushed. It took a second to find her voice. "I didn't expect you to admit to it."

"Why?" Delphine asked, tilting her head at a slight angle. "We both know it's true."

"Yeah, but normally," Shay said, avoiding Delphine's eyes, "people deflect a truth like that."

"Like you deflect my invitations to be a guest in my home?"
Shay raised her eyes cautiously. So. They were going to get into it, after all.

Delphine smiled, not coyly or teasingly, but feebly, tired in the way she had seemed weary for what felt like so long lately. "I can offer you dinner. And a television."

Shay sat quiet.

Delphine blinked almost sleepily. "Are you afraid of something?" Her lips twitched at the corners. "My cooking? If the prospect makes you nervous, I don't have to cook. I can manage takeout very well. Is it the television? I'm sure we can agree on something to watch."

Shay opened her mouth to lie—I don't want to be a burden—and simply inhaled instead. She held the breath and let it out in a little sigh. "I . . ." Shay glanced away. "I can't give you a real answer because I don't know the answer either."

Shay pushed herself to her feet to fetch the nail polish remover and cotton. Delphine watched her without a peep and offered her hand without prompting when Shay returned.

"I'm sorry," Delphine murmured as Shay concentrated on the stubborn red running all over the cotton fibers and Delphine's skin. "I—I'm a little tired today."

Shay stared unseeingly at Delphine's hand. Then she bit back a laugh. She raised her eyes to find Delphine's. "You mean you've been thinking about this, but you've been keeping it to yourself, and the only reason you brought it up now is because you're tired?"

Delphine's shoulders twitched in a shrug. "I suppose I thought you would accept an invitation eventually. It's not me, I don't think, otherwise you wouldn't allow me here in your home. Unless there's something you aren't telling me."

"You're welcome here," Shay assured her.

"And you're welcome in my home."

"I know," Shay said. "I know. Sometimes it's just—the timing is weird. You work longer hours than I do and you've been so busy—and—" Shay shook her head. "Will it sound weird if I say that I don't know how I'll feel being in your home?" Delphine looked at her in question. "You've always . . . come to me. To my office. To my place. It's . . ." Shay settled on a slanted truth. "Kind of nice."

Delphine's eyes narrowed.

"What?" Shay asked.

"I think I understand," Delphine said.

Surprise jolted through Shay. "You do?"

"Maybe," Delphine allowed more cautiously. "The invitation is open, when you're ready."

"So I can show up at your door at two a.m.?" Shay teased.

"If there's something keeping you up until two a.m. that you need to come to my door, then, yes, of course, come over."

"Really?" Shay asked, wearing a smile of uncertain laughter.

Delphine nodded. "Yes. I'd welcome the opportunity to help you. For once."
Shay's heart skipped a pitter for a patter. She shook her head as she recovered. "I'm not sure you have the time to spare for any more troubles."

"I'd make time," Delphine replied immediately, then seemed to catch herself and sighed. "Though maybe you're right."

Shay relaxed into the familiar smile of sympathy. "At least today's Friday."

Delphine shook her head. "I plan to work tomorrow. I have a number of things I need to prepare."

"Is that why you wanted to veg out tonight?"

"Veg out?" Delphine repeated with perplexity.

"Do minimal thinking."

Delphine nodded. "It may be that I don't want to think about what I need to do."

Her friend's tired visage spurred an impulse. "Want a massage?"

"Excuse me?" Delphine asked.

Shay teased Delphine about returning to her massage table, even meant it in an official capacity, but she'd never made a casual offer of the genuine service. A danger for a precedent, perhaps, or maybe too much blurring of lines.

But they'd fuzzied a few tonight already. What would another hurt?

"One-time offer," Shay said, to save some veneer of insouciance. "On the house. As a bonus, you'll find out why I bought the couch given its construction."

Delphine's brow crinkled. "You bought that safety hazard deliberately because it's a safety hazard?"

Shay rolled her eyes. "It's not a safety hazard." She tapped the back of Delphine's hand. "Come on. I'm going to show you to appreciate it."
Chapter 19

Stretched out upon the divested couch—short for the length of Delphine's frame, somewhat low even for someone of Shay's stature to ply her trade, but serviceable to them both as an improvised massage table—and steeped in soft electric light and the flickering halos of candles, loosening beneath the press and knead of Shay's hands for the first time in a long time, Delphine dangled on the precipice of unconsciousness. She blinked sleepily upon the pillow of her crossed forearms and asked, "Are we friends?"

Shay's hands stopped. The lull lasted only a second before they resumed their practiced route. "What made you ask that?"

Delphine adjusted the lay of her cheek. "I was trying to remember how we became friends."

Shay leaned upon her forearm and slid the load of her weight up the span of Delphine's back, impeded somewhat by blouse and bra, barriers that hadn't existed in the past. "Like most people, I think."

Delphine released the breath she'd held under the pass. "How is it that most people become friends?"

Shay repeated the motion up the other half of Delphine's back. "Well, I guess most friendships don't start with a massage, but I think it happens by spending time with one another."

"But..." The plastic grip of her bra strap dug briefly into Delphine's scapula and elicited a wince and truncated hiss. "...just spending time with someone doesn't mean you become friends."

"But you don't become friends with someone unless you spend time with them," Shay pointed out. Delphine could hear the smile in her voice.

"Touché," muttered Delphine into her arm, "as you Westerners like to say, but not an answer to my question."

Shay kneaded in silence with the heels of her palms for a time. "Which one?"

"They are both related, aren't they?" Delphine lifted her head and craned her neck to glance at Shay. "Are we friends and, if we are, how did we get here?"

Shay focused on the motion of her hands. "You came to me for massages, I asked if you'd like to get coffee sometime, we ended up getting dinner instead, and for some reason after that we kept arranging to meet up."

"That made us friends?" Delphine wondered.

Shay's forehead crinkled in thought. "The some reason did."

"What was the reason?" Delphine asked, voice falling hushed. Her gut tensed.

"Honestly?" Shay replied. "I don't know."

Delphine relaxed in the wake of Shay's words, struck with a feeling she couldn't entirely identify. "That doesn't help me, then."

"Help you with what?"
"How to make a friend," Delphine murmured. She rested her head back upon her arms.

"You're trying to make a friend?" Shay asked, gently.

"I don't know," Delphine admitted. "It might make things easier. It might not."

"Does this have to do with work?" Shay asked with a strain of caution.

Delphine gasped in a humorless chuckle. "Yes."

The pressure from Shay's fingers eased. "I really don't understand what you do."

Delphine sighed. "Some days I don't know what I'm doing, either."

*]

The laboratories and offices of the DYAD Institute never truly shut down, even on weekends, but those who ventured in were more akin to ghosts haunting the vast halls than the busy bustling bees in the hive during weekdays. The sense of abandon and dormancy reached Delphine even in the old wing though there was not a more forgotten and liminal space in all of the properties. She'd considered availing herself of Aldous's compartments, if only for the more enjoyable view she could mindlessly consume as her thoughts ran fruitlessly upon a wheel of frustrated ideas, but the old wing was to be her work home now—Cosima's and hers—and it was nice to have it to herself before she had to fully cede sovereignty to its designated tenant.

Thus she wasn't prepared when the electronic lock buzzed and the door opened.

Cosima stepped in, head bobbing to an inaudible rhythm, and got halfway into the room before she noticed Delphine staring at her from a computer workstation. Cosima froze, then reached up to disodge the earbuds from her ears.

"Hey," Cosima said slowly.

"Hello," Delphine said, somewhat more recovered.

"You . . . work weekends?" Cosima asked in such a conflict of tones that Delphine wasn't sure what the contributing emotional elements might be, whether confusion or scorn or skepticism or wariness or alarm.

"Not usually," Delphine admitted, "though I do come in when I feel I need to."

Cosima nodded with the sluggishness of an outmoded CPU trying to process large packets of data. "So this weekend you felt like you needed to come in?"

"There were a few things I wanted to prepare, yes," answered Delphine. "And you? What brings you here?"

Cosima wiped at the air in a counterclockwise direction relative to herself and shook her head. "Hold up. Rewind. What are you preparing?"

"Everything we have related to the illness." No reason to lie. Presenting Cosima with what they had been able to assemble of the full picture had been Delphine's express purpose. "To give us a starting point."

"Like Katja."
Delphine nodded, barring any interval of hesitation. "What we were able to gather from her." She cocked her head. "But why did you come in?"

Cosima frowned, not at Delphine's question, but in consideration of what preceded it. She might not have heard Delphine's question at all, if her body language served as indication. Cosima followed the wire of her earphones to the phone attached to it and fiddled with the screen. The tinny buzz from the earbuds shorted out. Unplugging the wire and rolling the mass into a ball, which she shoved back into her pocket along with the phone, Cosima shrugged. "The person I'm staying with needed their home back, so I figured I'd hang here. As good a place as any. I mean—" Her eyes glanced at Delphine through the top edge of her lenses. "—it's my lab, right?"

Delphine smiled wanly and indicated behind her with a twitch of her head. "They delivered the couch."

Cosima grinned. "Sweet."

"If you need to find your own accommodations," Delphine said offhandedly as Cosima dumped bag and coat onto an empty chair, "HR can help you."

"You mean I can't just sleep here?" Cosima asked, back to Delphine so that her face was unobservable.

Delphine hesitated. "I'm not sure the couch is that comfortable."

Cosima flashed a grin over her shoulder. "So I can stay if it's comfortable?"

Delphine thought briefly of the couch in Shay's apartment, which, despite its shortcomings, had proven safe and comfortable and precisely suited to Shay's intentions (or the ones she claimed, Delphine wasn't ready to verbally cede her the victory).

"I mean that I don't know if you want to have to sleep on it if it's not comfortable," Delphine said. "You will need your rest."

Cosima made a small sound like a harrumph of laughter as she dug about her bag. "Good call. Thanks, doc." She hauled out her laptop. The sight of the bright, science-themed skin made Delphine smile just as it had the first time she'd beheld it. "So how far have you gotten?"

Delphine considered, then turned the monitor to face Cosima.

In the word document she had open, the cursor blinked at the end of a single sentence.

Cosima laughed. "Making lots of progress there, Dr. Cormier." She considered Delphine for a moment. "I figured you for someone much more efficient."

"It's Saturday," Delphine proclaimed in self-defense.

"Yeah, well that's not going to help me," Cosima said, setting down the laptop and conducting a high and low search for an electrical socket. One at the base of the station proved serviceable and Cosima straightened up with an arch look. "Why not just tell me since I'm here? Or, better yet, give me access to DYAD's databases."

"I planned to provide the relevant documents," Delphine said. "Relevant" made the corners of Cosima's mouth jerk up. "I was serious about HR helping you find a place to stay in Toronto."

"I know," Cosima said airily. "But they already got to decide where I was going to live once and I'm
not sure I want to give them that choice again."

"What do you mean?"

"They chose my surrogate mother, didn't they?" Cosima said. "I'd call that my first place of residence."

Delphine checked a smile, lost against the effort, and succumbed to a helpless grin. "Alright. That's fair. How did that work out for you?"

"How do you mean?" Cosima asked, more fully lending Delphine her attention. "Like do I have a good relationship with my parents?"

Delphine nodded. "Yes."

"I love my parents," Cosima said, matter-of-fact. "My folks are great."

"So it worked out well," Delphine pointed out.

"But it could have possibly been not great," countered Cosima.

"Which is true of everyone and their parents, biological and otherwise," Delphine argued.

"But in our case," Cosima said, leaning toward Delphine, "we could have been put into bad situations—deliberately."

Delphine absorbed her words. "You mean to say that DYAD could have intentionally chosen poor mothers and parents for their subjects."

"Nature versus nurture." Cosima shrugged. "If you maybe only have one shot, why not aim to cover the whole spectrum?"

Amazement briefly muted Delphine. She shook her head. "What would make you think that such an idea would occur to the scientists who conceived the experiment?"

"I don't know," Cosima said dismissively, turning away, "a monitor system that places strangers close to their subjects via intimate relationships in order to spy on them?"

Delphine inhaled sharply. She'd walked into that blow. And yet. This wasn't going to work if every interaction between them was going to be barbed and boobytrapped in this manner.

"Fine," Delphine exhaled sharply. "But tell me this: objectively speaking, how would you have done it? How would you have maintained observation of an experiment like this short of keeping all the subjects confined in one place?"

"Seriously?" Cosima asked.

Delphine threw up a careless hand. "Yes. I was asked the same question and not until I received the answer could I begin to see the breadth of obstacles present and the resources needed."

"And the answer made sense to you when you heard it?" Cosima asked, crossing her arms. Delphine nodded, measured and contemplative. "It was . . . surprisingly simple."

"Yeah, it made sense to me, too," Cosima concurred curtly.
It was possible Delphine gaped at Cosima.

“So why do I keep bitching about it?” Cosima presented rhetorically. “Just because it makes sense doesn’t mean it’s not screwed up. You only have to think about it for two seconds to see that. You can see that, right?”

Greg wafted to the forefront of Delphine’s thoughts. Greg always by Jennifer’s side. Greg who avoided Delphine’s eyes. Greg who had been in communication with Leekie from the beginning.

“You’re my monitor, aren’t you?” Cosima asked.

Delphine exhaled unevenly through her nose. “Yes.”

Cosima nodded once, succinct, and turned away to look into the monitor of her laptop, expression blank but tight.

Delphine sucked in her lips. Closed her eyes. Ran a hand through her hair.

“That’s . . . my assignment,” Delphine said quietly into the density of the tense silence, opening her eyes. “That’s what Aldous calls it.”

Cosima scoffed at her laptop. “But not what you call it?”

“What I know is that you’re sick and that as a doctor I want to help you.”

“And the rest of it, the experiment? You expect me to believe that doesn’t matter to you?”

“I didn’t create it. I didn’t set it up.”

“Yeah, you just willingly participate in it.”

“Do you think they put out an advertisement?” Delphine snapped, sharper than she’d intended. “Research assistant needed for a human cloning trial?”

“You’re going to try to tell me that if they had you wouldn’t have jumped at the chance?”

They held one another’s gazes.

Delphine relaxed into her chair.

“I would have,” Delphine said quietly. “Just as I think you would have, if you had seen an advertisement like that. Not knowing fully what it entailed.”

Cosima’s jaw flexed and eased. “Are you trying to say you regret your decision?”

“I’m pointing out that the only way to see the details of the bigger picture was to commit entirely from the beginning.”

Cosima spread her arms. “Well, I’m all in! In ways you and Leekie aren’t. But no one seems to be showing me any bigger picture.”

Delphine breathed evenly.

Then she nodded and stood.
"Come with me," Delphine said simply and gave Cosima no reason and no opportunity to decline or argue as she quick-footed out of the lab and wended out of the old wing. In her wake, after just a moment's silence, Cosima's heels sounded off the floor and echoed in the corridors until Delphine slowed her pace and Cosima drew up alongside. The other scientist glanced sidelong up at Delphine's face. Delphine kept her attention fixed ahead. In tense, hurried silence they traversed the deserted halls.

The first security point drew real interest from Cosima. As Delphine's card swiped over the reader, Cosima's expression settled into a sober mask. Delphine ushered Cosima through the unlocked door, then again once more through another security point at the end of another trek. When the second door closed behind them, Delphine caught Cosima's elbow and held her back. The firmness of her grip raised a dimple between Cosima's eyes, but a glimpse of Delphine's expression scuttled any protest.

The in-patient care ward was staffed at all hours of every day of the week, but not constantly and not vigilantly. Delphine could only hazard a guess at the rounds schedule. Their luck saw the reception desk unmanned. A further scan of the hallways in both directions signaled they were in the clear. Setting a brisk pace, Delphine guided Cosima around the corner and slipped her charge into the room marked for patient "J.F."

Delphine closed the door behind them as quietly as she could manage and pitched her voice nearly at the same volume. "We cannot stay long."

Turning around, Delphine realized Cosima might not have heard her. Not because the reports of the monitors drowned out Delphine's warning. Because the figure in the bed held Cosima transfixed. Cosima approached the bed slowly, her footsteps now light and unremarkable, and circled around the far side, eyes fixed on the face.

Seeing the caution with which Cosima moved and yet the unmistakable allure that drew her to the bedside, Delphine felt the undeniable certainty that it was always going to come to this, bringing Cosima to see Jennifer, despite orders, despite deterrents. It wasn't a written overview she'd wanted to give Cosima, thus why she'd been inspired no further than a single sentence. It was this introduction.

Delphine sidled up to the other side of the bed. She spared a glance for Jennifer, the diminished disturbance in the sheets sprouting wires from necklines and arms, cheekbones prominent and taut in the sunken face, and squelched the turning of her heart with a rough swallow of the little moisture in her mouth. But her focus remained on Cosima. Cosima's chest heaved in shallow breaths. One hand crept up and settled, hesitantly, on the banister rail, fingers curling, gripping, knuckles going white.

"She won't wake," Delphine said in the same hushed tone. "She fell into a coma a few days ago."

No visible reaction registered in Cosima's countenance at her words. The intent eyes never wavered from Jennifer's form. But after a time the mute scientist reached down and gingerly rested her fingers atop Jennifer's inert hand.

Then Cosima pivoted on a heel and stormed out of the room.

Delphine gaped after her. Her immediate impulse was to follow, but a thought held her back, something like the memory of Shay gazing out with reluctance and apprehension between the slightest of fissures in the doorway. A moment allowed Delphine to gather herself and, with no one watching, gently seize Jennifer's nearby hand and squeeze, once.

When Delphine stepped out into the hall, she found Cosima standing to the side of the door like a
sentry, eyes focused into the distance straight ahead.

The reverse journey to the old wing occurred in inverse fashion. Cosima set the pace, brisk, hustling with a surety that lent the false impression that she was familiar with the halls. Stubborn, simering silence issued from her as a palpable force that smothered all impulse of communication. The glances Delphine darted in Cosima's direction availed nothing given the other woman's lack of expression. When they gained the privacy of the lab, Delphine said, "You cannot tell anyone what you just saw," and Cosima said, "Who was that?"

Their words collided and left them both watching one another warily, attempting to judge who would—should—speak first.

"Her name is Jennifer . . . Fitzsimmons," Delphine said slowly, crossing her arms beneath her breasts, "and you were not supposed to see her."

Cosima leaned back against a lab station counter, tongue pushed against the back of her teeth, and mirrored Delphine's stance. "Not supposed to see her."

"Jennifer was the first case we were aware of," Delphine continued with the same measured circumspection, "about six months before Katja Obinger."

Cosima's eyes drilled into Delphine. "You guys have known about this for that long? Were you going to tell us or just let us drop like flies?"

Delphine felt a spark in her own ire at the flare of Cosima's. "This is a disease that has defied our attempts to identify it. With how little we know of its cause, onset, and development, it's not as if we could concoct a test for it overnight. We didn't even have hard evidence it could be genetic until additional cases appeared."

"Like me," Cosima scoffed, pushing off the edge of the table and pacing away in agitation.

"Yes," breathed Delphine, deflating, "like you."

"How many others?" Cosima asked.

"I don't know," confessed Delphine.

"You don't know?" barked Cosima.

"They don't tell me everything, either," Delphine said, head bowed.

"But you know about Jennifer," Cosima said, the edge still sharp in her voice.

"I worked with Jennifer," Delphine said, almost more to herself, eyes fixed on the floor.

"What?"

"I was the assisting physician assigned to her." Delphine raised her eyes. "Until I was assigned to you."

Cosima's jaw flexed. "She didn't look like she was doing too hot back there."

Delphine nodded. "I know."
"Is this supposed to make me feel better?" Cosima quipped. "Because it's not."

Delphine sighed and lowered herself into the nearest seat. "It's not supposed to make you feel better. I want you to know that I want to work with you, Cosima. What I know about this, you'll know." She wiped at her eyes. "Please, believe me."

Cosima tapped the surface of the table. "You're asking me to trust you?"

Delphine shook her head. "I'm asking you to work with me. We need to work together. The faster, the better."

"And put everything else aside," sniggered Cosima.

Delphine tossed up a hand carelessly. "If you cannot put it aside, then at least don't make it a priority. It's a waste of time and energy to fight me on everything."

There was a second wherein Cosima didn't react, then she loosed a huff of laughter. "So what should I do? Try to sleep with you instead?"

"What?" gasped Delphine, eyes wide.

Her reaction tripped something cautious and uncertain in Cosima's gaze. All hints of sarcasm and cynicism fell away. In the vacuum appeared a consideration tentative and reluctant. Her tone assumed a manner all business:

"Show me what you've got."
Saturday proved a long day of searching and printing and collating and reading and providing additional commentary and follow-up clarifications. Like the use of identification numbers in lieu of redacted names. Or the different types of medications that had failed. Or the lengths of time between stages of Jennifer's illness. It was, Delphine reflected, somewhat dismaying that it required not much more than a day to cover the material DYAD had amassed on the illness itself.

Of the extra-medical material, the hours of Jennifer's video diary they possessed on hand, Delphine made no mention. To allude to them would necessitate producing them. And therein lay questions Delphine didn't feel prepared to address. Including the presence of Greg. Delphine felt the inevitable comparisons could wait.

They ordered in a late lunch, delivered to the security guard at the front entrance and ferried back to the lab by Delphine, then broke when their stomachs clamored for dinner and called it a night.

Sunday found Delphine at home, keeping house, running errands, doing laundry, picking up dry cleaning, and stocking a modest pantry. A message from Cosima interrupted the afternoon with an inquiry regarding any plans to head into the lab. Delphine informed Cosima she would be in the next day, ready for her questions. An altogether different missive arrived from Shay the same day: a photograph of a laptop screen displaying a film title, "Pride & Prejudice." *This is what u'd be asking for.*

Delphine smiled. *Higher quality than I expected.*

*Casting aspersions on my tastes?*, Shay demanded.

Delphine chuckled and let the question go unanswered.

Monday continued her and Cosima's Saturday efforts. They holed up in the lab, the lone two of them, the hours marked by shifts in their seating arrangements in relation to one another. Sometimes they huddled nearly knee-to-knee, leaning forward bent at the waist in close conference, or pressed into the backs of the chairs with frustration or resignation or taxed patience. Other times Cosima sprawled with outflung limbs upon the couch or the single-seater, like a house dog or cat disparaging the capricious whims of human notions of furniture, tossing out questions to Delphine across the room.

Their interaction was . . . better. The sniping reared up less, but the tension had yet to dissipate. Delphine sensed it lurking, one misconstrued comment away from being sprung. Where remarking upon the available resources of a multinational corporation invited the observation that it took a multinational to devise and maintain a nefarious undertaking of the magnitude of Project Leda.

For the most part Delphine let such moments slip, uncontested, unacknowledged. Cosima's anger was a sore she kept inviting Delphine to prod and Delphine wanted no part of nudging that growling beast.

Tuesday saw Cosima arrive well into the afternoon. Concern manifested first in Delphine. She surveyed Cosima for signs of fever or pallor, discomfort and aches, sweat or dehydration, but Cosima strolled through the door casually and easily, a flush of color in her cheeks, but likely for the same reason she was bundled up in layers, looking well-rested enough that there was a good chance she'd woken at noon.
"Question," Cosima prefaced grandly. Delphine raised an eyebrow at her. "Do you have a car?"

"Pardon?"

"Vehicle. Automobile. Personal conveyance mechanism."

Delphine held up a hand to stall Cosima. "Yes, yes, but why are you asking?"

"I thought about what you said the other day." Cosima said, plopping into a chair, swaddled in coat, bags, and scarf, "about looking into getting my own accommodations. I did a little research and I thought we could scope out a few places."

"I remember suggesting HR could help you," Delphine said warily.

"And I remember presenting why I'm against that," Cosima said. Her hands dispelled any further revisitation of that discussion and orchestrated thoughts through the air. "Anyway, I thought, seeing as how you're my monitor, that you'd like to see the places I might consider making my home."

"You want to go look . . . now?" Delphine asked.

"It's as good a time as any, right?" Cosima fired back. "Unless you're sitting on a breakthrough."

"No, but—"

"I figure," Cosima interjected, "the sooner I take care of this, the sooner I'll have less to worry about and the better I can focus on," she waved a hand about, "all of this."

Cosima studied Delphine pointedly. Delphine resisted an impulse to press a knuckle to her lips. Instead she crossed her arms, then crossed her legs, and leaned back in her seat in a test of the springs.

Cosima smiled. The effect was impish, mischievous, intimating hidden secrets and undivulged motives.

Not an expression transposed from Jennifer.

Delphine pushed back the mass of her hair with a hand. She imagined Aldous assessing the situation.

Make friends. Make nice.

Make like a monitor.

"How many places are you considering?"

Five.

That was the number of Internet-vetted vacancies to which Cosima had whittled her list. For the time being. She hadn't, she confessed, contacted the respective landlords yet to secure unit viewings. She simply wanted to get an idea of the lay of the land. If they could score a walk-through at any promising property, all the better, but she wasn't too concerned on that front. She even wondered, from the leathery coziness of Delphine's passenger seat, if Delphine knew of any prospects, perhaps a place for rent in her own complex.

Delphine demurred.
Cosima also insisted on playing navigator. She wouldn't disclose the exact locations or the names of developments, but directed by means of programming the address into her smartphone, despite the fact that the car featured onboard navigation. The stilted, but still pleasant artificial voice of Siri snaked them around the city from one point to another, course correcting as needed—which was more often than Delphine considered efficient. It quickly became apparent that the actual task of minding directions didn't impress much of a sense of duty upon Cosima. She didn't warn of upcoming turns or indicate which lane would best serve them. She barely glanced at her phone. Not when the passing view held her rapt.

A panorama rendered more varied and comprehensive, Delphine realized, by the additional turns and unforeseen detours.

Cosima twisted, craned, and panned in her seat to catch sight of every landmark, storefront, and distinction. Her absorption in taking in the city led Delphine to wonder if that had been the primary motive in her prospective options—and the order in which they were visiting them. Because otherwise Delphine could find little to tie the properties together aside from the fact that there were rooms to let. Geologically they were far-flung from one another and would not have formed a cross-section at the DYAD on a map. One was so modern and sleek as to give Delphine the impression that the paint had only just dried. The second building was dated enough that Delphine doubted it was fitted with central heating.

By the time they were en route to the fourth place on Cosima's list, Delphine accepted the venture as Cosima's excuse to see the city. The thought buoyed Delphine. It lent the outing a sense of accomplishment, that the trek and trouble yielded something of substance and gain. Delphine had never seen so much of the urban landscape herself.

Maybe that was why the growing familiarity of the scenery penetrated Delphine's mindless compliance to Siri's instructions with delayed recognition. Soon Delphine was reassuring herself that the destination merely required them to travel through the neighborhood. When a series of turns yielded distinctive street names, Delphine determined to herself they were heading somewhere proximal to her knowledge.

"I think that's going to be it up there on the right," Cosima said, pointing helpfully. "I'll keep an eye out for an open parking spot."

Delphine fixed her gaze ahead, as if by refusing to look at where Cosima indicated she could deny substantiation to the crystallizing reality marked by Siri's placid countdown of the diminishing distance until their arrival at their destination.

"You have passed your destination," Siri announced as Delphine continued to roll down the street. "Recalculating. In twenty-five feet, turn right."

But Delphine didn't.

She had no desire to circle back to Shay's apartment complex.

Delphine did circle back. Because to drive on with resolute disregard was more suspect than to capitulate to the demands of an unfeeling, unrelenting app. Disobedience would require unnecessary
explanations when in all likelihood Cosima would exhibit no more interest in residing in that particular building than she had in any previous prospect.

Delphine tried not to rush the inspection, to quicken her pace to force Cosima to match step. She passed a desultory eye over the building’s facade, as if it looked like any other building on any other street in any other sector of the city. She trailed behind Cosima as they gained the halls where Delphine studiously ignored one particular door on the first floor. When a peek into the main office revealed no one in attendance, Delphine smothered her impatience to usher Cosima on.

It worked.

They were in and out within fifteen minutes. Quick, perfunctory, efficient, witness to hardly any sight of interest.

Relief lightened Delphine's step. She and Cosima would go back to the car, proceed to the last stop, perhaps return to the lab or even to Cosima's temporary lodgings, if Cosima's caginess didn't extend to concealing its whereabouts.

The figure that materialized on the sidewalk obliterated that fantasy.

Shay, conveying a reusable tote of groceries, smiled immediately upon seeing Delphine. "Hey! I thought that was your car I saw back there, but you didn't text or call so I wasn't sure."

Cosima, hands shoved deep into the pockets of her startlingly red coat—not unlike the red of the nail polish Shay had smeared upon Delphine's finger—and strolling lackadaisically ahead of Delphine, pivoted on a heel to glean Delphine's expression. Delphine knew what she was looking for: recognition, acknowledgement, familiarity.

All of which must have shone plain upon Delphine's face.

With piqued interest, Cosima fixed her attention on Shay, who glanced warily at her, as if just noticing her existence or, more probable, making the connection that she was affiliated with Delphine. Cosima flashed Shay a smile, earnest and winning.

Uncertainty bled into confusion on Shay's face. Delphine could see Shay measuring the situation, reconsidering her approach, wondering if she'd misstepped.

Delphine summoned a feeble smile. To reassure her friend.

"I didn't know I was coming," Delphine told Shay. She closed the distance between them to prevent them having to raise their voices. Cosima followed her lead, at a slower pace, shuffling forward in smaller steps. Delphine's words brought a different sort of puzzlement to Shay's eyes—and belatedly Delphine realized she'd given that explanation once before under very different circumstances. She rushed to clarify. "I was driving and following directions and—I didn't know this was where we were going." The "we" hung in the air. Delphine held out an arm to indicate Cosima. "Shay, this is Cosima. We work together. Cosima, this is Shay."

Cosima's hand shot out, ready. "Nice to meet you."

Shay shifted her bag to her left hand to shake Cosima's with her right. The two assessed one another and for the life of her Delphine could not guess at what went through either's mind.

"Nice to meet you," Shay echoed. She glanced at Delphine. "What brings you here?"

Cosima indicated the apartment complex behind them with a jerk of her thumb. "We were looking
into vacancies here. I just moved to the city and I'm looking for a place."

Shay smiled, polite but guarded. "Did Delphine tell you about it?"

"No," Cosima crooned, sparing a sideways look for Delphine that sent her dreadlocks shivering, "she didn't. Though I guess, to be fair, I didn't ask her." Cosima considered Shay. "Do you live here?"

Shay nodded. "I do."

"Do you like it?" Cosima asked.

"I do," repeated Shay, with more ease. "It's actually a converted public building, so all the units are a little different. I think I lucked out getting mine. But if you're looking for a place to live, I can tell you the neighborhood is quiet and pretty safe. There isn't a garage for residents, though, so it can be a hassle sometimes to find a place nearby to park."

Delphine, listening, wished she could have curbed the enthusiasm of Shay's endorsement of the establishment.

Shay added more measuredly, "Also the rent is . . . a little steep. Especially if you don't have a roommate."

"Do you have a roommate?" Cosima asked.

Shay's answering smile held a self-deprecating laugh. "I don't."

Cosima grinned. "Are you looking for one?"

Shay laughed. Not in a polite way, but in a manner pleasantly startled. "No, I'm not. But," she glanced again at Delphine, "if you work with Delphine, I'm not sure you'll need one."

Cosima followed Shay's line of sight, catching Delphine's eyes. "Yeah?"

"Just a guess," Shay said.

Delphine cleared her throat. "There was one other place you wanted to see, yes, Cosima?"

"Yeah, there's one more," Cosima confirmed. In an act of small mercies, Cosima took Delphine's hint. Then she said, "But, um—Shay, right? Would it be cool if we exchanged numbers or email addresses so I can contact you if I have any questions about this place? I mean, if it's not any trouble."

Shay hesitated, the request catching her by surprise, but recovered with a fluid reach into her bag. She took out a card and held it out to Cosima. "This is my business card. You can reach me at the email address there."

Cosima took the card and held it between her hands. All the while her eyes didn't stray from Shay's face and her lips bore a faint smile. "Thank you."

"Shall we go?" Delphine asked softly.

"It was nice to meet you," Shay said to Cosima, grasping the baton Delphine had flung out.

"Likewise," Cosima said. "I'm glad we ran into each other."
Shay smiled, tight-lipped, and cast a quizzical look at Delphine.

"Some other time," Delphine said, checking any habitual apologies for not being able to linger. She capped her curt words with a smile that she hoped was conciliatory.

Shay's eyes lingered on Delphine, gauging, and when Delphine made no move toward her, Shay nodded. Goodbyes were exchanged and Delphine and Cosima resumed their way.

Focused on gaining the car, Delphine smothered a touch of unease. The ordeal had been kept brief and summary but Delphine couldn't help but feel that the damage was done.

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"Massage therapist," Cosima said aloud in the car, after having spent some minutes examining the business card of one Shay Davydov, RMT. It was an observation, declaration, and question rolled into two words awaiting elaboration.

But Cosima said nothing more and Delphine made no overture at volunteering.

Cosima tapped the card against her palm and peered out the windows.

"Seemed like a nice place," Cosima remarked idly.

Within a week, she'd taken out a monthly lease.
The day that Shay was introduced to Cosima, Delphine sent her a message late in the evening:

From Delphine [10:57]: I didn't mean to surprise you earlier. I didn't know one of the apartments Cosima wanted to see would be yours. We were there for such a short time, I didn't think we should bother you.

Shay contemplated the message as she brushed her teeth, then took up her phone after she toweled off her face.

To Delphine [11:03]: No need to apologize. I thought u dropped in and saw I wasn't home.

Shay bit her lower lip.

To Delphine [11:04]: Cosima wasn't what I expected a coworker of urs would look like.
From Delphine [11:05]: She is American. She relocated recently.

Shay laughed to herself.

To Delphine [11:06]: U realize not all Americans r like Cosima?
To Delphine [11:06]: There r prbly relatively few like her.
From Delphine [11:10]: Then what did you mean?

Shay's eyebrows flicked up in amusement.

To Delphine [11:11]: U kno, the dreadlocks, the piercings, that whole look. I guess it doesn't seem very "scientist" to me.
From Delphine [11:12]: What should she look like then?

Shay paused, aware Delphine had cornered her into exposing the foolishness of her thinking. In the privacy of her apartment, Shay loosed a little grunt of annoyance.

To Delphine [11:13]: Alright. Sorry. I was being narrowminded.
From Delphine [11:13]: Would you say I look like a scientist?
To Delphine [11:14]: I said I was sorry!!!!
To Delphine [11:14]: Didn't u call me a hippie once?????
From Delphine [11:15]: To be precise, I thought you were a hippie. I would say it turned out to be an accurate assessment of your general outlook.

Shay shook her head, put her phone aside, and climbed into bed. Fine. Whatever. She wasn't going to let Delphine derive any more pleasure at her expense on the subject. However, Delphine apparently wasn't finished because Shay's phone chimed a few minutes later.

From Delphine [11:20]: What did you think of Cosima?

Shay blinked. The change in topic was unexpected.

To Delphine [11:20]: I barely spoke to her.
From Delphine [11:21]: Your first impression.
To Delphine [11:21]: Didn't we have a whole convo about how first impressions aren't good measures of ppl?
From Delphine [11:22]: If I remember correctly, we talked about how first impressions are formed quickly. I think you had enough time to form a first impression. No?
To Delphine [11:23]: Is it weird that ur asking me for my first impression of ur coworker? I feel like that should be weird.

Shay sighed. The problem with trying to get around Delphine was that she was too intelligent and keen an observer to deter. It was also getting late.

To Delphine [11:25]: She seems nice.
From Delphine [11:26]: That's it?
To Delphine [11:26]: I talked to her for a minute.
To Delphine [11:27]: I feel like if anyone should have questions for anyone, I should be asking u questions.
From Delphine [11:27]: I wanted your opinion.

Shay stared at the words, undecided between feeling put out that she'd been derailed and touched that Delphine had so plainly solicited her thoughts. Contemplation of her bedspread resolved Shay to write:

To Delphine [11:29]: I was a little distracted.
To Delphine [11:29]: By you.
To Delphine [11:29]: U didn't seem comfortable.
To Delphine [11:30]: I didn't want to embarrass u.
From Delphine [11:30]: Embarrass me?

Shay let the question linger, unsure how to elaborate. That Delphine's closed expression and reticence had imposed on Shay a sense of caution. That she hadn't wanted to say something that Delphine wouldn't have wanted her to say—though she had no idea what that something might be. That in just the same way she hadn't wanted to take any action that Delphine didn't signal or initiate, like greet her or take her leave in the French manner that had become habitual between them.

From Delphine [11:35]: You did not embarrass me. I suspect I embarrassed myself in front of you.

Shay frowned at her screen.

To Delphine [11:36]: U didn't. Just worried me a little.
From Delphine [11:36]: Sorry.
From Delphine [11:36]: I didn't mean to.
From Delphine [11:36]: I had a lot on my mind.
From Delphine [11:38]: Are you trying to tell me something?
To Delphine [11:38]: Yeah. Yoga and meditation would help with that.
From Delphine [11:39]: When will you give up?
From Delphine [11:40]: Then it's best I quit while I'm ahead. Bonsoir.

Shay lifted an eyebrow at her screen. But she was smiling.

She hoped Delphine was, too.

To Delphine [11:40]: Good night.
A double parked moving truck impeding street traffic tended to herald the arrival or departure of a tenant. Shay peeked out of her window onto the scene as the truck's back door was slid open to reveal a puzzle-fit of manipulated boxes and furniture. A new tenant, then. Who stood a ways back on the sidewalk overseeing the ensuing debate as to how to best approach the offloading. Whom, Shay realized in a heartbeat, she recognized.

Shay slipped on a coat and stepped outside.

"I guess you didn't have any questions?" she called out as she approached the impassive figure huddled with arms crossed against the chill.

Cosima turned toward the sound of Shay's voice, glanced offhandedly at her face, then did a double-take when she realized she'd been the addressee of Shay's question. Cosima smiled at her. "Hey."

"Hey, yourself," Shay said. "You decided to move in?"

Cosima gestured at the truck. "Yup. Did you say something to me earlier? Wasn't really paying attention."

"I said I guess you didn't have any questions," Shay reiterated.

Cosima smiled, an inward-turned expression. "I didn't. Not any worth bothering you about. But I might have one now."

Shay smiled and said, with a laugh in her voice, "Isn't it a little late for that?"

Cosima craned her head to assume a sideways vantage point from which to study her. "You think it's too late to ask which unit you're in?"

At that Shay did laugh.

"You're here early," a voice said and they both turned to see Delphine approaching from up the street.

Cosima shrugged. "Had nowhere else to be, really."

"Hey," Shay greeted Delphine. "You're here to help?"

"Something like that," Delphine agreed.

"If you'd told me, I could have prepared iced tea or lemonade or something refreshing." Shay jerked her head in the direction of the movers. "Those guys will be thirsty soon."

Cosima's attention jerked back onto her, eyes narrowing.

"You'd have done that?" she asked just as Delphine said, "Just as well I didn't mention it then."

Cosima looked from Shay to Delphine and back again.

Shay cleared her throat. "Do you need help hauling things in?"

Cosima smiled. "I think the plan's more along the lines of supervising. About half of those boxes are just books—they'll throw out your back if you try to lift them. Better to leave it to the professionals, I think."


"And there's nothing like the portability of having all your books at your fingertips on the go," Shay said. "But I know what you mean. You can't really 'flip' through an ebook." Shay smiled to herself. "Not that I have any reason to complain; my e-reader was a gift."

At the edge of her peripheral vision Shay could discern Delphine watching the two of them. When Shay snuck in a more direct glance, she found Delphine stone-faced, expression closed, but vigilant. A thought niggled, then blossomed into clarity: Shay had never seen Delphine look more "doctor"-like than in this moment, but exactly what quality lent the impression Shay wasn't sure. The passivity? The modulated distance? The cool assessment in her eyes?

Shay rubbed at her arms. "Are you guys going to stand out here watching the whole time?"

"I think there's probably going to be some standing inside watching, too," Cosima said.

"Well, if you want to come in . . ." Shay offered in vague terms.

"You didn't say which unit you're in," Cosima pointed out.

"Ground floor. Number 2."

"Second floor," Cosima said. "Number 13. Just follow all the noise and commotion and you'll find it."

Shay shook her head. "It's probably best to stay out of the way. Too many chefs in the kitchen and all that."

"Or in this case, movers," Cosima said, though there were only two movers, likely because there'd only been space for two in the truck, a driver and a passenger.

Shay turned to go back inside the building—she did have a few things to do—and caught Delphine's eyes behind Cosima's back. Her friend said nothing, but after a moment Delphine nodded.

Amid the spurts of ruckus emanating from the hall, the knock sounded upon Shay's door about thirty minutes later. Delphine stood on the other side, wearing a faint air of apology. "May I use your bathroom?"

"Of course," Shay said and let her in.

When Delphine emerged from the bathroom, Shay asked from the kitchen, "Are they getting thirsty yet? I can bring some water up."

Delphine joined her and hunched over the dining table, forearms balanced on the edge, fingers interlacing. She stared at her hands for a time, not answering Shay's question, then looked at Shay and spoke lowly. "Shay, be careful with Cosima."

"Whoa," Shay said, putting down the glass of water she'd poured for herself. "That doesn't sound at all ominous."

"I don't know her well," Delphine continued, earnest, eyes intent on Shay but somehow not intense, voice unwaveringly pitched to a soft timbre. "She told me only yesterday that she was moving into this complex."
Shay cocked her head. "Was there a reason she told you? That doesn't seem like something you need to tell your coworker."

"It is if you want to write off moving as an expense."

Shay pursed her lips in a soundless whistle. "That's some perk."

Though not that different from what she heard the military offered service members, which made Shay wonder more about her friend's mysterious company. Delphine only nodded, shrugged, something along those lines of dismissal. "The company is generous."

"So you're not here to provide moral and friendly support?" Shay asked. Her forehead pinched in thought as memory recreated the morning's tableau. "You didn't drive her here, did you?"

Delphine shook her head in negation.

"Still not sure why you're warning me, though," Shay said carefully.

Delphine examined the far wall, perhaps reading the time on the analog clock. "That she chose an apartment here may not be coincidence."

Shay tapped the counter surface. "Well, you said she just moved, right?"

Delphine nodded.

"From the States? She might not know anyone here. She's probably looking for people to meet and, since we met briefly, maybe she thinks knowing someone in the building will make it easier to settle in."

Delphine studied Shay's face during a long, uninterrupted silence. At last she said, "Yes. It's possible."

Shay skirted on the edge of a frown. She and Delphine lived in separate worlds, Shay knew. Her own was open to Delphine—it was how they met—but Delphine's existed behind a closed door, heavy and sturdy and under the watch of a strict hazel-eyed gatekeeper. "Are you feeling weirded out because Cosima is your coworker? You think I'm going to try to pry secrets out of her?"

The line of inquiry must have come at Delphine like an unseen right hook because she looked stunned for a moment. She shook it off and said, slowly, "It hadn't occurred to me, but I would appreciate it if you did not do that. Though I hope Cosima would know better." Delphine sucked at her lips. "But what I meant was that you should be careful."

Shay slipped on a frown in consternation. "Are you trying to tell me that I shouldn't be friends with Cosima?" Shay shook her head. "Which, by the way, seems a little premature."

Almost imperceptibly Delphine released a prolonged steady breath. "I'm not saying that. Whether you want to be friends with Cosima or not is your choice. And Cosima's."

Shay crossed her arms. "But you're making it sound like Cosima's dangerous."

Little to no reaction registered in Delphine's person in response to Shay's interpretation. Delphine held herself so still there was nothing to read in her body language. At last a twitch around her mouth suggested a grimace. "It's complicated." Then, as if making a confession, Delphine added, "I'm her supervisor."
"Ah," intoned Shay, as if that provided plausible explanation, but upon further inspection, Shay wasn't so sure it did. "What are you worried about? That she's going to complain to me about you?"

Delphine cracked her first effort at a smile. "I'm not worried about that—I'm pretty certain that's what she'll do."

"I'll defend your honor," Shay assured her. "If it's deserved."

"Thank you," said Delphine drily. It was the closest to a return to usual form that Shay had seen yet. It was short-lived. Softness rebound Delphine's voice, lending an air of resignation to her words. "I know you will be you. Just . . ."

"Be careful?" Shay finished. "It would help to know what I'm supposed to be careful about."

Delphine gave her a tired smile. "I don't know, exactly. It's just a feeling."

On her last word, a crash and startled shouts reverberated from the hall. Shay and Delphine jumped and directed their attention toward the door. They exchanged wide-eyed, uncertain looks.

"We should probably make sure everyone's alright," Shay said.

"Yes," Delphine agreed.

In the hall was a lake spill of books, mostly hardcover volumes, many in good and matching leather bindings, the box that had torn beneath their collective weight still in the arms of one of the hapless movers.

"She wasn't kidding about the books," Shay muttered, almost appreciative. In the subsequent scramble to clear the mess and then being whisked into the moving effort, Shay and Delphine found no more time to continue their discussion.

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With the moving truck emptied—double-checked by a quick walkthrough for anything that might have fallen out or rolled about the trailer—paperwork signed—by Delphine, who reviewed the forms and slipped the copy of the receipt into her purse—the movers sent on their way—with one last glass of water each, a courtesy that had Shay acutely aware of how the younger of the two movers, easily younger than herself, smiled at her shyly and awkwardly tried to avoid brushing her hand in accepting the glass and stammered a bashful thank you during which he avoided her eyes (and why her and not Cosima or Delphine, who were both attractive women in their own right—but then maybe it had to be Shay when there was something wild and unpredictable about Cosima's appearance, in that choice of dreadlocks in combination with a form-clinging dress and flowy scarves and the starkly outlined eyes behind her lenses like a gaze that would peer out from hieroglyphics, while something else altogether intimidating and austere seemed instilled in the manner of beauty that touched Delphine's features)—and the apartment on the second floor furnished haphazardly with transplanted lamps and nightstands and chairs (but no couch, Shay noted, though the upright chairs were stuffed to plumpness) and bed frame and mattress, the items that along with the desk had provided the greatest challenge in maneuvering into their new home, bare of sheets that lurked unlocated in one of many unopened boxes strewn and piled about, the three of them stood in the not-empty-but-not-yet-filled space and Shay, holding two drinking glasses to convey back downstairs, said, "Is anyone hungry?"

"Yes," said Cosima.

Delphine said nothing.
But the three of them together transported themselves down via elevator—a little silly, Shay thought, as she would have taken the stairs if she'd been alone, but they'd all automatically headed for the conveyance, having ridden it countless times already that day—to Shay's apartment to drop off used glasses, during which Shay explained that there were a few dining establishments within walking distance, but far more options existed within just ten, fifteen minutes of driving. "We're actually close to Little Italy if you want to do pasta or pizza. It's a few blocks north of here." Shay retrieved her coat. "There are even a few Japanese places—and a Vietnamese restaurant if you like that."

"I'm down for anything," Cosima proclaimed.

"There are a few restaurants I prefer," Shay admitted, "since there are more options for a pescetarian."

"Yeah?" Cosima said, brightening. She placed a hand on her chest. "Mostly vegetarian."

"Mostly?" Shay asked, slinging her purse upon a shoulder.

They shuffled out into the hall.

"I do chicken sometimes," Cosima said, "but I'm not really into beef or pork. Fish is okay but I don't miss it."

Shay locked the door, smiling to herself. "There are lots of fish that are good for you."

"Sure, but what about the concentrations of mercury that accumulate in them?" Cosima retorted. Behind her, Delphine tilted her head, as if debating on agreement or disagreement with her fellow scientist. No, that wasn't it. Delphine most likely agreed, if the evidence existed to corroborate the claim; what Shay imagined she might be debating was voicing that agreement.

Which wasn't a debate Shay had ever before imagined Delphine to conduct with herself.

They trooped out into the brisk day. The sun beat down weakly against a chill factor that whipped at their clothes and insinuated itself close to their flesh through seams of their clothing.

"Should I drive?" Shay asked, hunching in her coat and looking to Delphine.

"Your car is small," Delphine said.

"It can hold three people," Shay declared, defensive.

"I'll drive," Delphine said placidly. "You can navigate."

On the walk to Delphine's car a block over, they settled on pizza for a late-lunch-slash-early-dinner, as if by mentioning it earlier Shay had planted the seed of craving. Well. Shay and Cosima settled on pizza. Delphine offered nothing by way of argument or agreement, but when they piled into the car—Shay in the passenger seat by unspoken understanding, to facilitate navigating, and Cosima in the back behind Shay, though sometimes she shifted to sit more on the center hump, disdainful of the seatbelt—Delphine blasted the heat, eased into traffic, and took the streets and turns Shay indicated.

The time they arrived at the restaurant suspended them between the hectic lunch and dinner rushes. They had their pick of a table and then their pick of toppings, huddled around a single menu, which caused a cascade of deliberation that transpired like a survey on:

Onions:
Shay, "It doesn't really matter to me."
Cosima, "Do you like them raw or cooked? Because have you noticed that sometimes with pizza you get them almost between those two states? Not crisp but not soggy."
Delphine abstained from comment.

Basil:
Shay, "I love basil on pizza."
Cosima, "I could go for basil."
Delphine abstained from comment.

Mushrooms:
Shay, "You know what surprises me a little? The number of vegetarians who don't like mushrooms."
Cosima, "Well . . . I'm not that big on mushrooms. I can eat them. I know some people who like mushrooms because they have that, like, almost meaty texture? Which, I think if you're framing it like that, seems a little sad."
Delphine abstained from comment.

Artichoke:
Shay, "I love artichokes, but not so much on my pizza. Actually, now that I think about it, I'm not sure I've ever had it on pizza. I think my gut reaction is to not put it on there because it's not a topping I associate with going on pizza."
Cosima, "I'm not sure I care either way. I've had it on pizza. It's good. How do you usually eat artichokes?"
Delphine abstained from comment.

Eggplant:
Shay, "Again, not really something I imagine on my pizza. Actually, now that I think about it, I'm not sure I've ever had it on pizza. I think my gut reaction is to not put it on there because it's not a topping I associate with going on pizza."
Cosima, "I don't think I've ever had eggplant on pizza, but I agree about the parmesan."
Delphine abstained from comment.

Zucchini:
Shay, "Have you ever had zucchini bread?"
Cosima, "Does it taste like zucchini?"
Delphine abstained from comment.

Green peppers:
Shay, "Yes."
Cosima, "Agreed. If we go with the green peppers, I think we should go with the onions, too."
Delphine nodded.

Extra mozzarella and other assorted cheeses:
Shay, "I'm all for cheese, but on pizza sometimes I like more, sometimes I don't. I don't like it when they place big slices of cheese in random spots and it doesn't really melt. Or you just get patches."
Cosima, "I like cheese, but I don't love cheese. I'm fine with the usual level of cheese."
Delphine abstained from comment.

Sun-dried tomatoes:
Shay, "Oh, yes, please."
Cosima, "Alright."
Delphine might have smiled.

Olives:
Shay, "I like olives."
Cosima, "So do I."
Delphine, "How many toppings usually go on one pizza?"

Anchovies:
Shay, "I'm okay with them."
Cosima, "Not really in the mood."
Delphine, looking at Cosima, "Yes, probably best to avoid those levels of salt."

Which was, really, the only opinion Delphine offered on the entirety of the pizza affair—and it didn't have much to do with the pizza itself. They wrangled out an order and settled into that potential awkward phase of waiting for food to arrive with nothing to occupy hands or mouths. Tucked among the salt, pepper, and parmesan cheese shakers was a beverage menu. Cosima plucked it out to examine the wine portion. Shay felt it was too early for wine, but they perused the list in a hypothetical manner.

"Do you have a preference?" Cosima asked, flipping the placard over.

"Whites," Shay said.

Cosima nodded. "I'll drink either, but I prefer red."

Shay smiled to herself and caught Delphine's eyes. "I guess I'm outnumbered, then."

Cosima glanced over at Delphine, considering, eyes shrewd within the confines of bold eyeliner, but the two didn't quite acknowledge the other.

From there it was hard not to notice two things: That Cosima addressed conversation almost exclusively to her and that Delphine barely made a peep. Such behavior made sense in certain contexts, such as when Shay cautioned Cosima about the high use times of the laundry room—"Tuesday is probably the quietest day, but try not to forget about your clothes. The one or two times I've forgotten, I lost a sock—and I feel like that wasn't a lapse on my part, but that maybe someone was trying to send me a message." "Like as a punishment? That's pretty harsh." "Right? I hate losing socks. I didn't even leave my clothes in the machine for that long. I was so annoyed"—but Shay found less room for excuse in the light of other topics, as when Cosima related the hazards of what you might find deposited in a communal laboratory refrigerator. Shay looked to Delphine for confirmation—or, she hoped, elaboration—and received a small shrug that seemed to confirm the possibility but could have just as probably been a dismissal of a tall tale.

All of which, considered together, stymied Shay. It was one thing for Delphine to say she didn't know Cosima well, but another issue altogether if Delphine made no effort to engage Cosima whatsoever. Granted, Cosima didn't appear to be reaching out to Delphine either, which was the other thing that bothered Shay upon reflection: Cosima, all throughout the meal, proved an adroit, smooth conversationalist—interesting, funny, curious, well read, smart, quick, willing to fill in silences, equipped with anecdotes to spare. Between bites of thin crust, marinara sauce, and steaming, stretchy cheese that threatened first degree burns, Shay learned summarily that Cosima was from the North Bay Area of California ("You grew up on the coast and you don't like fish?" "Dude, not all fish are created equal on the culinary scale. Fish tacos? Almost always delicious. Salmon filets? Better as sashimi than grilled. It's so dry, you know what I mean?"), had moved to Toronto from Minnesota ("Aw, man, I was not ready for the coming of winter."
"I don't want to scare you, but . . ."), and had been studying a field she shortened to "evo-devo" ("That sounds like the evil version of the band Devo. Evil Devo.” "Whip it bad?").

Delphine listened, watched, and nibbled on a slice of pizza.
Despite the fact that Shay knew, through now long repeated exposure, what an engaging conversationalist Delphine herself was.

More than Shay cared to admit, Delphine's silence bothered her.

There was maybe one other thing that demanded note: Cosima had a cough that wouldn't quit.

Shay had heard it throughout the day, here and there, while they'd curried objects into the apartment, little fits that Cosima snuffled away or punctuated with a clearing of her throat. Throughout the meal Cosima kept her glass of water close at hand and a napkin within ready grasp. The onset of one particularly robust bout had Cosima excuse herself and make for the bathroom.

Shay watched her disappear around a corner, then turned to Delphine. "You okay?"

"What do you mean?" Delphine asked.

Shay decided to interpret that as an earnest question. "You've been quiet this whole time. You could try talking to her, get to know her."

Delphine held Shay's gaze for a second, then ducked her head and wiped at a spot of flour on the table. "We talk. At work."

Shay leaned forward, voice falling in volume. "Am I missing something? Just because you're her boss doesn't mean you can't be her friend." The word "friend" brought a memory bubbling up. "Wait. Is Cosima the one—"

Movement cut off her question. Shay relaxed in her seat as Cosima rejoined them. She scanned Cosima's face.

"You okay?" Shay asked and felt a bizarre moment of self-consciousness when she realized she'd lobbed the exact same question at Delphine.

Cosima smiled and waved off Shay's concern. "Yeah, fine, fine. It's just—this cough. It, uh, won't quit."

Shay nodded. "You know, licorice could help with that."

Cosima arched an eyebrow at her.

"You steep the root like a tea. It's sweet. I can give you some when we get back," Shay offered.

Delphine shifted in her seat, sitting up straighter, perhaps stretching her spine.

Cosima cleared her throat and took a sip of water. "Any side effects?"

Shay considered. "Do you have high blood pressure?"

In a movement that looked reflexive, Cosima glanced at Delphine. It was just a second and didn't raise a reaction from Delphine. "I think I'm good."

"In large doses or with prolonged use, licorice can raise blood pressure," Shay clarified.

"Does it act as a suppressant or expectorant?" Delphine asked, without warning.

"I'm not sure," Shay admitted, almost startled into answering at the unexpectedness of Delphine's participation.
"Then you might want to hold off," Delphine said, speaking softly, but decidedly to Cosima, "or try it in small doses."

Shay spread her hands. "If your cough has been chronic, you'll probably want to consult a physician."

Her remark elicited brief, startled looks from both Cosima and Delphine, who then exchanged glances with one another.

"Yeah," Cosima said, slow, drawn out, returning her attention to Shay. "I'll keep that in mind." In a moment her eyes acquired a sparkle. "Did you notice there was tiramisu on the menu? What do you say?"

Shay contemplated her companions. Then she said yes, because she'd seen the tiramisu on the menu and that's what she could say to dessert. Not always, perhaps, but to mark a special occasion—of course.

Cosima smiled in delight at her answer.

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Delphine dropped off Shay and Cosima in front of the apartment building and did not come in, though Shay wished she would, entreated her with a silent look to come inside, maybe so that the two of them could talk. There was a second where Delphine looked uncertain, like she might capitulate, but then she made an excuse about weekend chores and offered a halfhearted smile touched with apology.

In the hall Shay and Cosima went their separate ways, Cosima taking a moment to request Shay's phone number, plugging the string into her phone as Shay recited. When Cosima waved goodbye, Shay felt as if Cosima were dropping her off at her door, marked by the way Cosima drifted away but lingered to make sure Shay made it inside.

Once ensconced in her apartment, Shay considered her phone. She had a desire to send something to Delphine. A question. A comment. A string of question marks to encapsulate the mystification with which Delphine had left her. But nothing sounded innocuous and everything seemed invasive and Shay didn't know what she wanted to know, anyway.

It had been a strange day spent with strangers.

One had come to her as a full-fledged unknown entity, but before Shay's eyes the other had revealed herself as unfathomable and unpredictable as the former.

Chapter End Notes

The pizza topping options weren't supposed to be bolded, but the workaround I used to get the indented paragraphs to show up in AO3 was a definition list. XD Best laid plans... Silliness for a silly chapter.
Chapter 22

The knock at Shay's door disrupted the landscape of the desert at dusk she'd projected behind her closed eyes. She blinked against the light, unsure at first if the timid knock had been an actual noise or a phantom one, but a second volley issued, louder and more insistent.

"Shay?" a voice called through the thin barrier. "Are you home?"

Shay unfolded from her full lotus meditation pose and straightened up to her feet. The door opened beneath her cautious touch to permit enough space for her to determine the identity of her visitor.

The unmistakably dreadlocked Cosima smiled at her and fired off a shy wave from the hip. "Hey. Sorry to drop by unannounced, but do you have a colander I could borrow? I can't find mine. I think they're probably still in a box somewhere. Or still in Minnesota."

Shay widened the gap of the door and smiled. "Big one or small one?"

"One of each?" Cosima asked tentatively.

"Hang on a second." Leaving Cosima on the other side of the door, Shay retrieved a big and small colander from the kitchen, calling out, "Wait, this isn't for some science experiment, is it?"

"Just a food experiment," Cosima called back. When Shay returned and handed over the bowls, Cosima asked, "Are you hungry? I'm tossing salad."

Shay crossed her arms and leaned against the doorframe. "Trying to feed me again? I'm still not sure how I feel about you picking up the bill yesterday."

"Well," Cosima drawled, throwing up her free hand, "I had to since I don't think Delphine was going to let me pass it off as an expenditure."

Shay refrained from rolling her eyes. "I meant that I would have been happy to treat you to a welcome meal."

"And I was glad to express my thanks for the welcome and your help," retorted Cosima.

They stood at an impasse.

"Coming up?" Cosima asked, rocking the nestled colanders back and forth in a little jig. "You can make sure these are used for culinary purposes only."

Shay considered. Her stomach wasn't sending out desperate pleas but enough time had passed since she'd last eaten that sustenance wouldn't be remiss. "Alright. I'll come up for a bit. Let me put on some shoes and get my keys."

She stepped into ballet flats and scooped up keys and phone. On the way up she asked, with teasing suspicion, if Cosima had managed to at least locate bowls and plates.

"Bowls? Plates?" Cosima repeated in befuddlement. "You mean you're not cool with eating right out of the colander?"

Shay giggled but Cosima gave her a look that was all gently confounded gravity. But despite her performance, plates and bowls materialized, along with beverage containers and utensils. Shay eyed a teapot sitting on the counter and lamented, "I should have brought up some tea."
"Next time," Cosima said from the kitchen sink where she was washing greens, her delivery marked with an offhand confidence that there would be a next time.

"I can just skip downstairs," Shay said.

Cosima shook her head. "No need to bother now."

Shay helped with chopping tomatoes, red onions, and carrots—lengthwise to produce sticks—because it was better than sitting by idly watching her hostess putz about various tasks like mixing up a balsamic vinaigrette.

Cosima, swirling the contents of the jar, asked, "Should I toss the salad with dressing first or do you prefer to add it yourself?"

"Let's put it on the side."

They set up at a bare writing desk because there wasn't a dining table and the alternatives amounted to standing at the counter or using an unopened cardboard box. Cosima assigned Shay the tan computer chair while pulling up one of the plush upright chairs for herself. Shay didn't giggle, but she smiled.

"I didn't keep a dining table back in Minnesota." Cosima grinned and added, "More often than not, I just spread out on the floor."

"To eat?" Shay asked.

"Eat, read, write my papers—there's usually way more floor space than desk space." Cosima glanced around the studio. "Though maybe I could get a dining table this time."

"There's also plenty of floor space to enjoy here," Shay pointed out.

"Yeah, but a table would make it easier to entertain," Cosima said.

Shay nodded slowly. "It would."

Cosima peered at her through her eyelashes. "I have to ask."

Shay raised an eyebrow.

"You and Delphine." Cosima's eyes narrowed. "You're friends, right?"

Shay nodded, a self-deprecating smile momentarily winning possession of her lips. "I like to think so."

"How?" Cosima cleared her throat. "I mean, how did that happen?"

"You mean how did we meet?"

Cosima tilted her head. "Yeah."

"She came to me for massage," Shay said frankly.

Cosima nibbled on the end of the fork's tines and was quiet for a good stretch. "Hm."

Shay picked leisurely at her portion while Cosima gathered whatever thought brewed behind her eyes.
"Delphine," Cosima said slowly, curling her mouth around the name as if testing it, "doesn't really strike me as the type to treat herself to relaxing massages."

Shay smiled. "There are lots of reasons to get a massage."

"And you're a massage therapist," Cosima said, leadingly.

Shay shrugged. "Delphine's reasons are her own."

"Patient-doctor confidentiality, huh?" Cosima said.

"Something like that," Shay agreed.

Cosima nodded gamely. "Okay. So that explains how you met. But not . . ."

Shay raised her eyebrows in prompt.

Cosima cocked her head. "You don't work out of your apartment."

"No," Shay confirmed.

"So she's not coming to see you here to get massages," hazarded Cosima.

"That's right."

"She comes here to, like, hang out," Cosima said. "With you."

Shay nodded slowly. "You could say that."

One of Cosima's hands gestured in an aimless, grasping pantomime through the air. Her hands, Shay noticed, did almost as much talking as her mouth. "How . . . how does that work?"

A stab of confusion pinched Shay's features. "What do you mean?"

"You and Delphine—no offense, but—you two are like apples and oranges."

"You mean because she's a scientist and I'm not?" Shay wondered. "In that case, you and I shouldn't be getting along."

"Whoa, whoa, whoa," Cosima said, raising both hands to ward off any further thought, fork still brandished in one hand. "If you're saying that all scientists are created equal, that's totally not true. Dr. Cormier and I are, like, nothing alike." Shay earmarked the way Cosima referred to Delphine. "I'm a West Coast kid raised by hippies."

Shay leaned back in the computer chair, which gave beneath the pressure more than she expected. "Meaning?"

Cosima flipped her raised hands palms up. "I smoke pot and I'm intrigued by the new age thing you have going on."

Shay laughed, startled by the blunt honesty. "Yeah? And you don't think Delphine is?"

"A pothead?" Cosima asked. "Definitely not." She studied Shay. "Spiritual? I wouldn't bet on it."

"And because of that, though I'm not saying it's true," Shay filled in the blank, "you don't think she and I should get along?"
"I think it's unremarkable if you say hi to a client you run into on the street, but it's another thing to
know that person's wine preferences." Cosima paused. "Unless you often make friends with the
people who wind up on your massage table?"

Shay snorted. "You make that sound so—"

"Wholesome?" Cosima chimed in. She circled a hand through the air. "Massage is very therapeutic,
as far as I understand."

Shay smiled, but managed to say drily, "You're hilarious." She leaned forward conspiratorially.
"You know who else can be funny?"

Cosima answered with an expression of skepticism, expectant.

"Delphine," Shay said, matter-of-fact. Cosima looked unimpressed and unconvinced. Shay crooked
her head at an angle. "Do you not get along with Delphine?"

Cosima's shoulder hunched, not quite a shrug, almost like a turtle contemplating a retreat into the
defensive protection of its shell. "We get along. Well enough. Given the circumstances."

"'Circumstances' as in the fact that she's your boss?" Shay asked.

Cosima shrugged.

Shay leaned back. This time she expected the chair's give. "I had a girlfriend who complained about
her boss all the time, but . . . you and Delphine started working together just recently, right? I don't
understand . . . I mean I don't know what it is you do in the lab, but I just can't see . . ." Shay took a
breath. "I guess I'm asking what is there to disagree about that would make you uncomfortable with
one another?"

Cosima danced her fork through the leaves of romaine lettuce on her plate, spinning the handle
between her fingers so that the fork pirouetted from tine to tine, while her eyes fixed unfocused on
the desktop. When she raised her eyes, the look in them was almost something like bashful, but also
unreservedly earnest.

"She kinda reminds me of my ex," Cosima said.

Taken aback, Shay asked the first thing that came to mind. "Was he your boss, too?"

Cosima smirked. "No. My ex could be bossy, but she wasn't my boss."

The pronoun hung in the air.

_Oh._

Cosima scanned her face. "You okay?"

Shay smiled slowly, gathering her breath and her thoughts. "Yeah."

"You sure?"

Shay nodded, fighting down a gobsmacked smile. "When I said girlfriend, I didn't mean that in the
platonic sense."

She watched the knowledge and awareness cascade across Cosima's features, registered the lingering
second round of consideration that Cosima gave her.
"Dude." Cosima grinned. "I had you pegged wrong."

Shay ducked her head to hide a giggle. "Ditto. Though it's more like the possibility didn't occur to me." She swiped at her smile with her fingertips. A lightness filtered into the atmosphere, as if some tension had bled away. Words came more readily, more direct. "So. Wait. What about Delphine reminds you of your ex?"

Cosima shook her head. "It's all that . . . supervising. It feels like she's keeping tabs on me."

Shay raised an eyebrow. "What do you mean? Does she hover over your shoulder?"

"Sometimes."

"Really?"

Cosima shrugged. "It's part of her job. That and being beautiful."

A jolt went through Shay. The context hadn't prepared her for the comment. With what she hoped was success, Shay willed herself not to blush.

"Probably," Cosima added belatedly.

"Probably?" Shay echoed weakly.

"Being beautiful is probably part of her job."

Shay made several attempts at parsing Cosima's logic. She failed. "For who?"

Cosima shrugged carelessly. "For whoever has eyes."

Shay frowned. "Are you saying that you find it difficult to work with Delphine . . . because she's attractive?"

Cosima's eyes searched Shay's. "Who wouldn't be distracted?"

Shay felt exposed.

"Well, fortunately or unfortunately," Shay said, dropping her gaze to her plate, "I don't think she's like that. Like us."

"Yeah?" Cosima said, not sounding disappointed at all. "Guess that means we'll have to have all the fun without her."

Shay raised her eyes. From across the desk Cosima grinned at her.

"Shay seems to think you're a decent person," Cosima announced first thing Monday morning as she bustled into the lab. "A funny one, anyway. Though if you behave around her the way you did Saturday, I don't know how she got that impression. Which leads me to conclude that that's not how you usually behave around her. Which, in turn, made me question if you monitors get any formal training, because if so, maybe you missed it? Because I can say a lot of things about my last monitor, but at least she knew how to behave like a normal person around other people. Especially her own friends. Probably so that they wouldn't start asking questions. I mean, that's what I assume is part of the job."
Delphine let Cosima finish. Pitching her voice low and disregarding Cosima's tirade, Delphine said, "I received something you should see."

Her tone imparted urgency and weight that sobered Cosima and drew her undivided attention. At least Delphine had progressed that much with her charge that Cosima was willing to grant her some benefit of the doubt. Cosima crossed the room to her side with credible speed. Delphine held up the printouts she'd been reviewing.

"What is this?" Cosima asked, taking the pages from Delphine.

"Tissue test results. From a stem cell line," Delphine crossed her arms. "Compatible with you."

Cosima looked sharply into Delphine's face, as if searching for a lie. "Really?"

Delphine nodded, folding her arms and leaning back in her chair. "As far as I can tell. But I don't think I—or you—were supposed to see it."

"What do you mean?" Cosima asked, forehead crinkling.

"They were meant for Dr. Leekie," Delphine said, holding up the envelope she'd found in her inbox.

Cosima studied her. "But you looked anyway."

"I didn't check the name of the recipient until after I saw what was inside."

Cosima pressed a palm into the tabletop. "Okay, so . . . what? Leekie's hiding this from me? Not saying that's a surprise, but if he wants me to think that DYAD actually wants to help me, this doesn't inspire confidence."

"I don't know what is going on," Delphine said in a gentle, patient tone. "The only way to find out is to talk to him."

Cosima's eyes narrowed on her. "So we're just gonna go talk to Leekie."

Delphine nodded. "Yes."

"When?" demanded Cosima.

"Today," Delphine declared.

Skepticism curled Cosima's lips.

By late afternoon, they were stepping into Aldous's office.

"Cosima." He smiled at her as they approached his desk. "How can I help you?"

Delphine held out the test results. Aldous took the papers, the cheer fading from his features and a cautious puzzlement taking its place.

"I received these," Delphine said. "They were supposed to be sent to you. They're test results for a stem cell line that seems to be compatible with Cosima."

"Were you planning to mention it?" Cosima asked testily.

Understanding flooded Aldous's face as a form of acknowledgement. He laid the papers upon his desk before him. "I had been planning to mention it, when I had more concrete data. But," he
intoned in a forewarning, "there's been a recent development."

"What?" Cosima asked, crossing her arms.

"Rachel."

Delphine straightened up at the name. Cosima simply looked confused.

"What about her?" Cosima asked.

"She's obstructing further testing."

"Why the hell would she do that?" fired off Cosima, venting Delphine's confusion, along with an explosive anger.

Aldous's brow contracted. "In a word: Sarah." Delphine had only heard the name once before, but the message was clear to Cosima. Aldous extracted a photograph from a pocket inside his jacket, leaned across his desk, and held it up. "Have you seen this before?"

Delphine leaned forward just as Cosima did to better view the photograph. Time had bled sepia tones into the image and mishandling had warped it with crinkles but Delphine glimpsed a man and a woman in lab coats and what looked like an armed soldier in the background of a facility.

"Who are they?" Cosima asked, lifting a hand toward the photograph.

Aldous snatched the photograph back from her reaching fingers and made it disappear back into his pocket. Delphine glanced into Cosima's face. Disappointment lingered just beneath the surface of her expression.

"Two forefathers of the original experiment. This was in Sarah's possession."

This time the name, and not the mention of Project Leda's progenitors, sparked a flurry of unease in Delphine. She knew nothing about the woman, save that she most likely resembled Cosima and Jennifer in appearance and had some connection to the self-awareness that subjects like Cosima had achieved, in addition to the fact that—Delphine remembered now—she was somehow the mother of a child.

Sarah.

Was she investigating the clones' origins? In opposition, at the very least, to the liking of Rachel Duncan, whom Delphine had seen only once.

If Cosima were in league with this Sarah, Delphine began to ken Aldous's caution and paranoia.

But what Delphine couldn't yet see was whether or not this was a dangerous game. There was some consequence here in the arrested trial of the stem cell line, but other than being collateral damage, how much in its orbit revolved Cosima?

Aldous studied the both of them. Fingers interlacing, he laid his hands upon the desk. "I'm going to tell you something that only a handful of people know. Twenty years ago, there was a fire in one of our labs. Several scientists died, reams of data were lost." He paused. "And the original genome was destroyed."

As her mind processed the revelation, Delphine turned to Cosima reflexively. The other woman's face was a canvas of stunned shock that reflected what Delphine felt.
Delphine shook her head, eyes filled with a lost light as she turned to Aldous. "All this time I wondered why we weren't comparing the DNA of the afflicted subjects with the original genome, and it was because the original doesn't exist?"

"Yes," Aldous said tersely, eyes on Cosima. "We lost your pre-history, Cosima, and with it, all record of several synthetic sequences embedded in your DNA."

Cosima's features scrunched. "What kind of synthetic sequences?"

"Sequences that make you possible. That overcome the viability issues that have haunted us ever since."

Cosima leaned forward. "You lost the road map, so finding the sequence in the genome is like looking for hay in a haystack."

The enormity of the deficit in which they were working sunk Delphine's heart. She could have hoped, she might have hoped, that maybe Jennifer had provided some type of map herself, but they were stabbing even more aimlessly in the dark than she could have fathomed, poking at protein arrangements they couldn't differentiate from naturally occurring or artificially concocted.

"So you see," continued Aldous, "if Sarah has uncovered something, I need to know."

Delphine watched Cosima. Her expression was the most serious and earnest Delphine had beheld. "I have no idea," Cosima told him.

Aldous didn't buy it. Delphine saw it immediately.

Delphine didn't know what to think except that she had not even begun to scratch at the surface of what she thought she didn't know. Project Leda was an abyss and she repeatedly mistook echoes wafting up for indications of the bottom when in reality whatever coin she'd tossed inside it was just ricocheting off the sides.

Aldous's jaw flexed. "Whether I believe that or not, as a gesture of good faith, I'm willing to disregard Rachel and proceed with the treatment."

The room held a breath, as if all parties were allowing the dust to settle so that they could deduce where the truces had fallen and realigned.

Cosima nodded, lips set in a grim line.

Delphine exhaled quietly.

"This treatment," Delphine introduced hesitantly, "if it proves effective, we can use it for all the subjects?"

Aldous gave her a sharp look edged with a reprimand. "We developed this line from baby teeth, and while we've had success with cultivating a pluripotent culture, there's a limit to our resources. We'll take it one step at a time."

Delphine understood. Cosima was the priority.

Aldous brightened with some cheer. "We'll conduct an intradermal test first, to see if there are any negative reactions. I'll see to preparations and meet you in the lab tomorrow."

With an exchange of glances, confirming to one another that they'd been dismissed, Delphine and
Cosima rose and left the office.

In the elevator, staring at the closed door, thoughts sinking into the hole of machinations at the rate of her stomach's plunge with the elevator's descent, trying to see the lock-stepped forces swirling intangible and unseen around her, Delphine said, "Shay is a good person."

Next to her, Cosima scoffed. "Jesus. That's what you want to get into right now? We just learned that the original genome is gone—hasn't even existed for twenty years!—and that without it we have a snowball's chance in hell finding the synthetic sequence in our DNA that might be causing this problem—if that's even what's causing the problem!"

"This Sarah," Delphine said, in the same soft tone, drawing Cosima's immediate attention—likely because Delphine seemed to ignore her response, "is she your friend?"

Cosima crossed her arms and shook her head, radiating incredulity. "She's—she's one of my sisters. A clone, in your parlance. What do you care?"

"You're in contact with her, then?" Delphine asked. "She knows? About everything?"

Cosima closed her eyes briefly, as if to guard against Delphine's audacity. "I'm not going to discuss what Sarah does or does not know with you."

Delphine nodded. "Shay isn't like us."

A dimple of confusion appeared between Cosima's eyes at the barrage of Delphine's ninety-degree pivots. "Where are you coming from with this? What do you mean? Like us how?"

The elevator slowed, pressing up against the heels of their feet.

"She doesn't have secrets like us," Delphine said.

Cosima smirked. She glanced up at the floor indicator, as if to have something to focus on that wasn't Delphine. "Dr. Cormier, you have secrets." The doors opened. "I'm the secret." Cosima flashed Delphine a toothy, humorless grin. "And besides, everyone has secrets. Shay included."

Cosima stepped off the elevator. After a second, Delphine followed after.

"What are you so worried about?" Cosima asked when they were back in the old wing laboratory. She pattered around the "chill zone," touching her bag, grabbing a scarf from where it hung on a pipe fixture serving as a peg. "That I'm going to infect her? News flash, the clone disease isn't contagious."

"It's not but your—" Delphine caught herself. "This world is." From where she lingered near the door, Delphine swept an arm out expansively, indicating the laboratory, but meaning the whole of DYAD.

Cosima favored her with a look that suggested she had sprouted a second head. "Well, I wasn't planning on telling her anything. Obvs."

"You're at the center, Cosima. You don't have to tell her anything to end up involving her."

Cosima raised an eyebrow. "If she's involved, then that's because of you. She's your friend."

Delphine's pulse jumped, but she forced her breaths to come evenly. "You're saying that your interest
in Shay is because she's my friend?"

Cosima shrugged, almost managing to affect carelessness, but it was an admission to a motive they'd both already known. "I thought the shoe should try being on the other foot." She folded her arms, also effectively trapping and stilling her hands. "So, now what? You going to tell me to stay away from her?"

Delphine fended off a momentary lightheadedness. "No."

"No?"

Delphine crossed her arms. "You wouldn't listen."

Cosima smirked. "So you'll tell Shay to stay away from me and the next time I knock on her door she'll pretend she's not home?"

Delphine shook her head. "She wouldn't listen either."

With that, remarkably, something gave within Delphine, a feeling of surrender, and maybe Cosima sensed the shift or felt something similar because a smile, faint and almost soft, curved her lips.

"Shay doesn't really strike me as the stubborn type," Cosima said.

"I wouldn't say she is," Delphine agreed. "However, she's the type who requires explanations."

"That makes sense," Cosima said, but sounding more as if she were speaking to herself. Cosima glanced in the direction of the windows. "She was more than I expected."

Delphine bowed her head and gasped out a sad laugh. "You've met her . . . twice?"

"How many meetings did it take for you?" quipped Cosima.

Delphine raised her head. Their eyes met. Cosima surveyed her with a cool gaze. Delphine wished she could have returned the self-contained steadiness. But she felt drained and raw.

After a time, Cosima asked, "I don't think we have anything else to do today. Do you want to drop me off at home?"

*

In the car, Delphine said, "The stem cell line looks very promising on paper."

"Is that your professional opinion?" Cosima asked the passenger window.

"It's my hopeful one," Delphine said.

"Because you want to help me," Cosima said, falling just shy of derision.

"Yes," Delphine said. "I want to help you."

The soft voices of talk radio filled the cabin uninterrupted the rest of the drive.

*

When Shay answered her door, she expected Cosima, a presumption that struck a wry chord of self-deprecating resignation within Shay's heart. But the figure on the other side was Delphine.
"Hey," Delphine said, a little hesitantly. "Bonsoir."

"Hey," Shay greeted her with surprise and warmth.

"I was dropping off Cosima," Delphine explained. "I thought I would say hi."

"That was nice of you to drive her home," Shay commented. She held the door wider. "Want to come in?"

"She asked me to," Delphine said, a little laugh or a sigh couched in her voice. She glanced beyond Shay into her apartment. "I won't stay long." She sounded like she was making a promise.

Shay tried to convey a double dose of exasperation in the furrow between her eyebrows. "Just because she asked you to drive her doesn't mean it wasn't nice that you drove her. And you're welcome to stay as long as you like." As Delphine made for the living room area and sunk into a seat, keeping her bag slung upon her shoulder and her coat buttoned against the comfortable temperature of the room, Shay retreated into the kitchen and asked, "Do you want something to drink? I was just making some tea."

"At this hour?"

"Chamomile tea. No caffeine. Though I guess, to be proper and specific," Shay called to Delphine, "it's not technically a tea. A chamomile infusion." Delphine caught Shay's teasing and sent Shay a wry twist of her lips. Shay grinned. "I still have that whiskey if you want. And all the wine."

"Nothing for me, thank you," Delphine said.

The tea needed another minute to steep. Watching Delphine, Shay leaned back against the sink counter. "How was the rest of your weekend? Good?"

Delphine nodded absentely. "Uneventful. How was yours?"

Shay offered a rueful smile. "Not long enough. As usual."

Delphine folded her hands upon her lap and studied her knuckles. "You spent more time with Cosima?"

"Yeah, she dropped by yesterday. We had lunch—she was kinda holding my colanders hostage. Even though I let her borrow them. Don't ask me how that worked because I'm not sure, either." Shay lifted the lid off the teapot and sniffed the steam that wafted out. "I actually thought that it was going to be her at the door just now." She grinned at Delphine. "But it turned out to be you."

"You're already expecting her to drop by?" Delphine asked.

Shay smiled to herself, pouring out a mug, amused despite herself that Delphine had reached the same conclusion she had earlier. "It's only been a weekend, but... kinda, yeah? It seems like something she would do—just come down unexpectedly." She carried her tea over to join Delphine and perched on the edge of the couch. "Does that bother you?"

Delphine seemed to think about it, fixated on a spot on the rug, then shook her head. "No. I want you to know, actually, that—maybe I overstepped. With what I said. On Saturday."

"You mean about being careful?"

Delphine nodded, but she was still studying objects around the room. "Yes."
Shay let that stew. "How was work?"

Delphine brought her attention back to Shay's face. The hint of a smile touched her lips. "We might have a promising development. It's too early to say, though."

"That sounds great. 'We' as in you and Cosima?"

"Yes. The team."

"So you and Cosima talked today?"

A flicker of annoyance might have pulled at the corner of Delphine's mouth. "I told you that Cosima and I talk at work."

"But not outside of work?" Shay asked.

Delphine shifted to look over Shay's shoulder. Her eyes tracked aimlessly, as if searching for something. At last she pushed back her hair and said, "Not in front of you." Delphine rolled in her lips, moistened them. "Cosima and I disagree on a number of issues, many of them work-related, things we cannot talk about outside of work. I didn't want to make things uncomfortable. By bringing in that tension." Delphine took a breath. "However. It may be that the person Cosima is with you is someone she cannot be with me." Delphine sought out Shay's eyes. "I—I would understand that."

Shay cradled her warm mug and tried to process what just happened. "You're going to have give me a moment. Two days ago you told me to keep my guard up and now you're . . . giving me permission to hang out with Cosima?" Shay cocked her head. "Did you guys talk about me?"

"No," Delphine said.

"Okay," Shay said slowly, "because Cosima and I talked about you. She's curious about you."

Delphine's gaze sharpened. "Why do you think that? What did she ask?"

"She wanted to know how you and I became friends," Shay said. "I'm telling you this because I get the impression that she doesn't know you, and she feels like she doesn't know you, and so because there's this sort of—" Shay shook her head. "—gap in her knowledge, she's filling in the details herself. . . . And using, maybe, not the best references for comparison. I'm not saying you have to fill in the correct information for her, but it might help . . . if there's tension."

Delphine stared hard off into the corner above Shay's bed, then turned back to Shay, leaning forward with her elbows on her thighs, fingers interlaced tightly. "What if she's not wrong?"

"From where I'm sitting, I don't see how she can be right." Shay twitched her shoulders. "Not entirely. By her logic, you and I wouldn't be having this conversation at all. But clearly," Shay smiled, "we are." Shay paused. "And I hope we keep having conversations like this. I was worried."

"I feel like you say that a lot lately," Delphine said quietly.

"Well, whose fault is that?" Shay sang teasingly. She sipped at her untested tea, as if to put a punctuation on her point. Heat stung her lips; Shay flinched back.

"Careful," Delphine chided, smiling a little. She pushed herself to her feet. "I should go. I'll try not to worry you so much from now on."
Which hadn't been Shay's point at any point in their relationship, but the weariness in Delphine's person dissuaded her from mentioning it.

Shay put aside her tea and walked her visitor to the door. Delphine kissed her once on each cheek in parting and stood simply looking at her for a moment.

"I'll try," Delphine repeated.

As she trailed away, head bowed, Shay stuck her head into the hall. "Hey!"

Delphine stopped, turning.

"Can I have a hug?" Shay asked.

Delphine stared at her for a second of incomprehension, then dissolved into a disbelieving smile. But she retraced her steps and let Shay throw her arms around her, leaning down to negate the heightened difference between them with Shay on bare feet. Shay latched on for a count of twenty and squeezed tightly for another measure of three.

"There," Shay said as she pulled away, smiling. "More data for you."

Delphine nodded, a smile faint, almost rueful, but detectable on her lips. This time when she drifted away, her steps carried less of the hallmarks of a trudge.
"A bit empty in here, wouldn't you say?" Aldous remarked upon the state of the old wing laboratory as he unpacked supplies at a cleared and sterilized laboratory counter.

Cosima swept a confused eye around the room. "You provided everything I asked for."

"I meant with just you and Delphine," Aldous said, laying out cotton and alcohol, syringe and bottle, nitrile gloves and rubber tie. "You don't have any requests for additional personnel?"

Cosima rolled her eyes. "Being put in clone jail doesn't exactly encourage socializing and vetting other DYAD staff." She tilted her head at a considering angle. "Although if you can recommend a sequencing tech, I could use one."

The hint of a smile, like a flag of victory cautiously run up above the line of the trenches, nudge Aldous's lips. "You would take my recommendation?"

Cosima looked wryly into his face. "You're not giving me a lot of options here. Besides, anyone I pick would be subject to your approval anyway."

"As per our agreement," Aldous said in a gentle reminder.

"As per our agreement," Cosima confirmed, voice far harder.

Delphine, observing them from a seat behind Cosima, was struck by the almost familiar rhythm in the back and forth of the barbed exchanged. The assumption of a confrontational attitude, the calculated feints and the verbal thrusts, were established parameters between the two of them. Yet Delphine knew in the time since Cosima's employment that they didn't cross paths frequently—Aldous regulated Cosima's access to him through Delphine. Which suggested meetings between them had taken place before Cosima's arrival at the DYAD. In what context, Delphine wondered. When she watched them now, as Aldous disinfected the injection site on Cosima's bicep and prepared the syringe under Cosima's nervous eye, it was easy to see how the other woman's animosity extended from her mentor to herself. That Cosima saw her as Aldous's tool and puppet.

Delphine had a difficult time finding fault with the assessment.

In a few seconds the entire procedure was over.

"There we go," Aldous said, as if soothing a child. "Now we see how your body responds."

"Yeah, so if my arm falls off, then we know," Cosima cracked. Delphine hid a smile behind a hand, but she couldn't determine if Cosima's bravado was an effort to conceal apprehension or a fragile hope. Clearing her throat, Cosima leaned toward Aldous, voice lowering, "So, um, Dr. Leekie. In light of what you shared with us, we have a proposition for you."

Gravity schooled Aldous's expression. The "we" hung in the air, encompassing no other person in the room. It was strange the thoughts that surfaced triggered by a seemingly innocuous word, the amorphous "we" conjuring like-faced women who bore no other defining details except maybe names like Sarah or Alison, or a stray disconnected realization intoning, Ah. Perhaps this was why Cosima went immediately and without comment to her apartment last night. To speak with her associates about what she'd learned.

It made much more sense than that Cosima had given her space following their conversation. Why
would Cosima have done so anyway? Out of consideration? For her?

Of course it made sense Cosima had been eager—and preoccupied with the need—to update her companions.

Aldous granted Cosima his full attention. "I'm all ears."

Ignored and circumscribed outside of the exchange, Delphine found herself straining to hear.

"We want to know . . ." Cosima stalled, surveying him, "you like to drink beer?"

Aldous's flummoxed reaction channeled Delphine's confusion. Cosima grinned.

"No?" Cosima asked, tongue poking between her teeth. "Maybe you should try it. Tonight. There's a place I know where you should go. Say, around eight? I'll write down the name for you."

Aldous studied Cosima, hesitant to conclude that she spoke in earnest. But Cosima did as she promised. When she handed over the slip of paper, Delphine glimpsed the name she'd written in legible, blocky handwriting: Bobby's.

With the injection deposited in Cosima's arm and unobservable interactions underway, the remainder of the day passed slowly, as time was prone to lag when suspended in the anxious, anticipatory state of imposed waiting. Both of their attention seemed fixed on the site of Cosima's upper arm. Cosima touched it absently now and again, seemed to think better of it each time, and ended up fidgeting in her subsequent attempts to ignore it. As the hour bled from mid-afternoon into late-afternoon, Delphine admitted to herself that nothing much was being accomplished—or that there was very much to accomplish in the first place.

"Why don't we call it a day?" Delphine suggested.

Cosima glanced over. "You're free to head out if you want. I'm not going to enforce holding you here from nine to five."

Delphine cocked her head. "You're giving me permission to go?"

Cosima flashed her a feral, lopsided smile. "You mean as opposed to you giving me permission to go?"

They squared off in a spot of silence.

"As far as my understanding goes," Cosima said, swiveling in her chair, "this is my lab."

Delphine nodded slowly. "Okay. But I was going to ask if you would like to get dinner."

"What? Dinner? Like just you and me?"

"I did say once that we could get dinner if we managed some work," Delphine said. "I think we've accomplished a lot since then."

"And here you are asking me out to dinner in person," Cosima drawled. "Alright, Dr. Cormier, you're on. Let's go."

The parking garage, lit as ever by dim fluorescent lights, echoed forlornly with their syncopated footsteps. They sequestered precious, valuable, and sensitive items—laptops—into the trunk of
Delphine's car and, with an air approaching practiced, circled around to their respective sides. Once they were on the road, blinking into the natural light of an overcast day as they emerged from the structure, Delphine glanced at Cosima in the passenger seat, gazing out the window, and couldn't help but feel that Cosima was beginning to look habituated and commonplace in the spot.

Was being a glorified chauffeur simply part and parcel of the job of a monitor? Delphine could almost hear Aldous chide her: Whatever actions were necessary and effective.

Delphine didn't ask Cosima what she might like to eat and when she parked the car a street down from their location, Cosima didn't ask or volunteer a preference. She simply exited the car and followed Delphine, right up to the moment Delphine reached for the restaurant's door. As if coming to her senses, Cosima straightened up, alert, and backtracked a few steps to the edge of the sidewalk to behold the name of the establishment above the door and glance into the street-front windows. Delphine held the door open for her.

Cosima delivered no comment until they were seated and left to their own powers of culinary literacy. Cosima flipped the menu open, flipped it closed again. "Thai is your first choice?"

"It was what first came to mind as we were leaving," Delphine admitted.

Cosima tapped the cover of the menu, eyes narrowing in speculation. "Did Shay bring you here?"

Delphine managed a little half smile of bemusement. "I brought Shay here. Well. I made the suggestion that we have dinner here." She lifted an eyebrow. "What made you think Shay had a part in this?"

"Thai generally offers lots of vegetarian options," Cosima remarked absently as she conducted a quick page-turning overview. Which was, in fact, why Delphine had picked the restaurant, then and now.

"Though tofu isn't everyone's thing," Cosima remarked idly as she scanned down the lists. She nodded to herself as she traversed the offerings cover to cover, then raised her head and appraised the restaurant, dim and intimate. "Not a bad first date spot."

"Excuse me?"

Cosima met her eyes. "I said this wouldn't be a bad spot for a first date. Though spicy food might be a little dicey or adventurous for some."

"But not for you?" Delphine wondered and then vaguely regretted it.

Cosima flashed her that toothy smile. "I'm up for anything, if the company's good. But DYAD knows that—right?"

Delphine sucked in a short, sharp breath. "Perhaps." She rolled in her lips, gave the smallest shake of her head. "I don't know. The truth is I don't know about your previous monitor—the details about her as a person or her relationship to you."

Cosima nodded absently, one hand pushing up the frames of her glasses as she ducked her gaze back into the menu. "You don't know because they don't tell you or you don't know because you don't want to know?"

Delphine evaluated the question. Cosima let her. The way she asked hadn't carried the sharpness Delphine had come to expect from her. It occurred to Delphine that Cosima might have been asking...
"Dr. Leekie . . . can be very particular with what he shares and what he doesn't. You saw that yesterday." Delphine breathed out slowly. "But on the subject of your previous monitor, I haven't asked. I don't know if he would tell me or not."

Cosima looked at Delphine over the top of her frames. "Why wouldn't you ask? Is this part of the whole compartmentalization of the project thing? Or is it that you're not interested in what kind of person can get close to me?"

"From what I understand," Delphine answered softly, "relations with your previous monitor did not end well."

Cosima fidgeted in her seat. The movement, Delphine realized, derived from the agitated bounce of a leg. "So then why not get the details and take away the opposite example?"

Delphine studied the white tablecloth. "Because to me it doesn't seem like what repelled you was her personality, but what she was." She lifted her eyes with some caution, but Cosima wasn't looking at her. "What you can't forgive is that she was your monitor." Delphine leaned back. "And in your eyes, your monitor is the only thing I am."

Cosima's jaw worked with tension. Her eyes flashed in the low lighting when they turned on Delphine in assessment. "You know what they did, right? They—"

A waiter materialized. Neither was ready to order, but, pulling herself together with remarkable speed and assuming a pleasant, if not exactly cheerful, air, Cosima requested an iced tea and, almost as an afterthought, put in an order of wraps as a starter.

The atmosphere lay upon them unsettled, its status as defused ambiguous. Delphine waited.

"They spied on us," Cosima said, with commendable calm, speaking to the tabletop. "And they let people into our homes. They let those people examine us in our sleep. They lied to us—" Cosima's eyes drilled into Delphine. "—and they didn't even know why they were lying. They had no idea about the whole clone thing; they just went along with the deception, no questions asked." Cosima shook her head, one hand stroking her chin. "You know, it's weird, but—it didn't bother me much, at first. When we figured out all this monitor shit, I'd already broken up with my girlfriend and moved halfway across the country. I didn't bring anyone with me to Minnesota, so there was no one who could have been spying on me. Maybe one person, but he was barely even a friend, just a guy in my classes, someone I talked to in the lab."

Cosima leaned forward and placed her forearms upon the table. "A clone trial actually sounds really cool when you first hear about it. You just think about—" Cosima threw up a hand. "—all the possibilities. They achieved human cloning in the eighties! Right beneath everyone's noses. Dolly? Nineteen ninety-six. I was born in nineteen eighty-five. We preceded Dolly by more than a decade! That's—that's totally crazy! And I lived my whole life without getting even a hint that I was at the middle of something so . . . so scientifically unfathomable!"

"And what was the big deal about the monitors? I figured: in a way, we sorta chose them, right? Beth's boyfriend—total beefcake. Not to my tastes, obvs, but I totally got why someone would want to sleep with him." Cosima shrugged.

Delphine studied her. There was a carefully constructed indifference in her mien, but Delphine could
hear anger under-stitched into her tone.

The iced tea arrived. They paused to both nod at the waitress who brought it.

Quietly, knowing she was wading into dangerous waters, Delphine asked, "What made you see the monitors differently?"

Cosima shook her head, lost in thought. "My ex showed up in Minnesota out of nowhere. She told me she wanted to get back together. I told her it was over, that I didn't want her moving or abandoning her degree for me. That it wasn't worth it. She said I would change my mind, that she was in town for a few days, that she wanted to see me, that we could talk about it. Well, one of those days, I went home early—and I found her in my apartment." Cosima gave Delphine a look of disbelief. "She broke into my apartment. Like she picked the lock on my door—I didn't even know she knew how to do that! That wasn't even the craziest thing. She had no idea why she was there! She was snooping through my things, but she had no idea what she was looking for." Cosima's voice dropped. "But you know what she did know? Leekie. She kept saying this Leekie guy ruined our relationship, that Leekie must be in town because of me, that he'd torn us apart, that she'd never wanted to leave me, she only wanted to protect me."

Cosima leaned closer. "'From what?' I asked her." Cosima leaned back with a shrug. "She didn't know."

The waiter reappeared, hovering more anxiously. Neither of them had revisited the menu, but both put in orders. Delphine settled on the dish she'd had when she'd first come with Shay. Cosima seemed familiar with Thai cuisine in general.

Left alone, Delphine ventured, "And that's what made you look at her differently?"

"No," Cosima declared in a bland monotone, "it was the shit that hit the fan afterwards." Cosima shook her head, jaw twitching in agitation. "She must have found something. Christ, she probably didn't even know she'd found something. The double blind. That was maybe the saddest thing. She just—had no idea."

"But she wanted to protect you," Delphine pointed out.

Cosima scoffed. "That is some really mighty fucking double think. She wanted to protect me, so she lied to my face the whole time and acted behind my back? Tell me you see a problem with that picture."

Delphine swallowed. "Would you have listened to her if she had one day suddenly told you everything?" Delphine shook her head. "Wouldn't you have been just as angry?"

"Not as angry as I was uncovering the truth myself. What she did was shitty from the beginning, but she didn't even have the decency to come clean."

"She was afraid of losing you," Delphine said. "The lie was too big. To tell you was to . . . risk destroying everything."

Cosima spread her hands. "Well, that's what happens when you screw people over. They get angry at you and they stop trusting you." Cosima pressed against the back of her seat, arms folded. "Then there's you. And this." Cosima cast her gaze around the restaurant. "I get it. Even if I don't get you yet."

Running her tongue over her lips, Delphine weighed her next words, then threw caution to the wind. "Do you want to 'get' me or is it easier not knowing?"
Cosima eyes narrowed. The wraps arrived. Picking one up, Cosima transferred it to her plate and spooned some peanut sauce atop it. She bit and chewed. After some consideration, she nodded her approval.

While she waited, her question still suspended between them, Delphine followed Cosima's example.

Cosima dabbed at her lips with a napkin. Without looking at her directly, Cosima said, "Before, you said something that . . . implied you didn't know what you were getting into."

Delphine inhaled deeply and released it slowly. This was something she had told no one. Because there was no one she could have told. "I was at first assigned to screening work. We were combing the genome for potential markers for any number of diseases. For example, a predisposition for cancers. As you know, the project is compartmentalized and normally someone in my position wouldn't have been told the larger purpose of the work."

"But you were," Cosima followed. Delphine nodded. Cosima took another bite of the wrap. When nothing followed, Cosima asked, "Why?"

Delphine shook her head. "A whim?"

"You mean Leekie's whim?" Cosima said casually, studying the wrap's vegetable stuffing.

"Yes," Delphine said simply.

Cosima scrutinized Delphine's face, then made a little sound in her throat, almost smiling to herself. "Then you were . . . promoted?"

"Yes. To the team working with Jennifer." Delphine nudged the wrap on her plate with a fork, one neat bite missing from an end. "I knew there was a clone project. I'm not sure I really believed it until I met her." She smiled ruefully to herself. "Though I suppose I didn't have proof there might really be clones until I met you."

"You were Jennifer's monitor?" Cosima asked, tone policed into neutral.

"No. Assisting physician."

"But you became my monitor."

"And primary physician," supplemented Delphine.

"And Leekie go-between." Cosima nodded. "There, the straightest line we could have drawn through the dots." She reached for more peanut sauce. "Why DYAD?"

"You mean why did I go to work for the DYAD?" Delphine asked, mind switching gears.

Cosima nodded around an effort to chomp through a wrap.

Delphine's eyebrows lifted with negligence. "They're a renowned multinational, conducting cutting-edge research. I did an internship and it became a full-time position. It seemed like a natural progression." Delphine studied her dinner companion. "You know. You've done your research."

"Oh yeah," Cosima said, nodding, not quite done chewing. "They've got some interesting stuff hidden behind closed doors."

"I mean their public profile," Delphine clarified, a little exasperated. "They're a high-profile corporation."
"With a high-profile director, yeah. What do you think about his book?" Cosima asked. She arched an eyebrow, swept her eyes over Delphine's hair. "You don't look like one of his followers."


Cosima nodded. "That's them. So you've read the book?"

Delphine shrugged. "Neolutionism is . . . a guiding principle. A philosophy. The idea that humanity should strive for self-determination by any and all means of available technology."

"With . . . no restrictions," Cosima pointed out. "Which I take to mean having no ethical scruples." Cosima cocked her head. "You think you could use Neolutionism to support, say, eugenics? Genetic cleansing by genetic manipulation?" Cosima's eyebrows lifted in a goad. "But who gets to decide what genes get to stay and which have to go? People like Leekie? You said you were combing our genome, right? Looking for the defects."

Delphine flexed an eyebrow. "Would writing cancer out of our genes be so evil?"

"The greater question is where do we draw the lines?" Cosima posited, pinning Delphine with a stab of her index finger. "Where do you think Leekie draws the lines? What comes after clones?"

"Designer babies," Delphine said simply.

For a moment Cosima looked stunned. Then she laughed. Delphine didn't.

"It's very likely we will see the technological capabilities to edit genetic traits with specificity achieved in our lifetime, if it's not already been developed but not yet made public," Delphine said. "We cannot, what is the expression—stick our heads in the sand, ignore it, and hope all goes well. Governments might ban or restrict the use of such technology for certain purposes, but that is not guaranteed to stop anyone."

"Such as the people and corporations willing to conduct an illegal human cloning trial," drawled Cosima. "So is that your angle? You're aiming to be one of the benevolent shepherds ushering mankind into the new age?"

Delphine shook her head, trying to mask a little laugh. "Shepherd? Like a guide? No. I wanted to do worthwhile research. I still want that. Is that surprising? Or heinous?"

Cosima huffed, almost in a sneer. "Joke's on you, then. We're bad science. We're defective. We're sick."

"You are the frontier of something new," Delphine said. "Evolution doesn't happen in a moment or without trial and error and chance. You of all people should know." Delphine shook her head, allowing a momentary pause to indulge in what the last months' strain and pressure had diluted and obscured. "You are a marvel. You are more amazing than I had imagined."

"With viability issues," Cosima said, deadpan. On cue, a short coughing fit disrupted the momentum of their exchange. Cosima paused to wipe her mouth. Their entrées also arrived.

They fell into silence. Not an easy one precisely. Cosima squeezed lime over the tamarind-tossed noodles of her pad Thai. Delphine divided out a portion of rice onto her plate and joined it with a spoonful of red curry.

"We're trying to correct the issue," Delphine said, gently.
"They might even get it right in the next batch," Cosima deflected.

Delphine took a moment to force the tension out of her jaw. "Are we not waiting as we speak to see if we might have a course of treatment worth pursuing?"

Cosima, in the middle of her first bite, couldn't answer immediately. She chased it with a sip of iced tea. "It's kind of the least DYAD could do, don't you think? Not to mention they have to have a lot of money riding on us. Thirty years of spying on—" She paused, brandishing the blank to be filled. Delphine shook her head. Cosima shrugged. "—at least a dozen subjects? That can't be cheap. They have to prove us viable, too, if whatever possibility we're supposed to present can be turned into a profit or put on the market."

Delphine stared down at her undisturbed plate. "What do you want, Cosima?"

Cosima looked at her wordlessly for a time, until Delphine met her study and they simply sat contemplating one another.

"I don't know," Cosima said. She didn't sound entirely angry. She sounded tired, maybe exasperated. She sounded, perhaps, even a little lost. "A sorry would be nice? Sorry you're sick? Sorry we've been spying on you your entire life? Sorry you didn't ask for this? Sorry you're a walking, talking proprietary secret?"

Delphine breathed evenly. They sat. They looked.

At last, Delphine said, "I'm sorry you're going through this."

Cosima twirled her fork by rolling the handle between her fingers. "Yeah, it's bullshit." Cosima shrugged and plunged her fork back into the tangled noodles. "Not entirely your place to apologize for it, though."

It took a moment for Delphine to understand what had just transpired: Cosima was letting her off the hook. For the blame of orchestrating the circumstances, at least.

"Did you know," Cosima said after her next bite, "that chopsticks aren't customary utensils in Thailand? They don't use them. So you shouldn't ask for them at Thai restaurants."

Delphine maneuvered a mixture of curry and rice onto her spoon. "I'll be sure to remember that. Would you like to try some curry?"

Cosima considered the offer. "Do you want some pad Thai?"

Delphine wasn't particularly hungry, but she accepted the sample portion Cosima transferred onto her plate—and, with the same degree of curiosity if not indiscretion that Cosima took in observing her taste the noodles, she made a mental note of how much Cosima consumed throughout the meal.

The dinner went on with less talk, and then only touching on more innocuous topics. ("I took a trip to Thailand one summer." "Did you like it?" "Oh, for sure. I'd love a chance to go back. What do you think are the chances that there's one of us there?" "Not impossible. If you mean born and raised, the probability may not be so high. But working or traveling? The chances are probably better than, I don't know . . ." "Hitting the Powerball lottery?" "Sure. I don't know what that is, but I assume the odds are very low?" "You could say that.") Delphine hesitated to deem it pleasant, but it was closer than they had come before.
Chapter 24

An unexpected message greeted Shay when she checked her phone first thing in the morning.

unknown [2:03]: Hey Shay. This is Cosima. Any chance you're up?

The timestamp disconcerted Shay. Unlike herself, who’d gone to bed before midnight as she commonly did, Cosima had clearly been up at two in the morning. That wasn't potentially unsettling in itself, but the fact that Cosima had sought out her company at that hour raised a flag. Most people, Shay assumed, who weren't particularly acquainted with someone, neighbor or no, would consider two in the morning to be an inconvenient and impolite time to contact someone. Which meant, as far as Shay could sift through possibilities, that Cosima didn't view impulsive two am outreach as outside the norms of conduct, Cosima had been bored, or Cosima had needed help.

The final possibility leapt to the forefront of the pack and fixated in Shay's muddled morning mind. Shay wasn't a fan of letting things stew and stewing baselessly from first thing in the morning was not how she wanted to start her day. Shay saved Cosima to her contacts and dashed off a reply.


Shay put her phone aside but the device chirped immediately. Startled, Shay retrieved it.

From Cosima [6:18]: No probs. I figured you were asleep.
To Cosima [6:19]: ur up already?
From Cosima [6:19]: Still up.
To Cosima: [6:19]: u didn't sleep? everything ok?
From Cosima [6:20]: Yeah. Just some drama.
From Cosima [6:20]: I guess it got me a little down. But it's OK now.
To Cosima [6:21]: U sure?

That Cosima might have spent the whole night up signaled that she might have been more than a "little down." Shay reviewed her schedule.

To Cosima [6:22]: I don't have to be at work until 10 today. Do u want to come down in like 20 minutes for tea?
From Cosima [6:23]: That sounds cool.

Typically Shay started her weekday mornings with yoga and meditation, sometimes a short run, before a shower and breakfast. Routine, she found, helped anchor days and move them along manageable tracks, especially on days where time seemed to stand still or slip away. A deviation of this nature intruded few and far between, but Shay was washed up, dressed, lightly dusted for presentation, and had the kettle on the stove when the knock, a touch timid, landed on her door.

Cosima looked exhausted, even though her makeup was just about perfect, winged eyeliner as expertly applied as Shay had ever seen it. The weariness resided more in her posture, an impression that she was holding herself apart, the bowed slump of her shoulders curling her shawl close about her person.

"Hey," Shay greeted her softly, as if raising her voice might strike cracks in her visitor's visage.

"Hey," Cosima echoed, throwing out one of her little waves. "Sorry to barge in like this."

Shay ushered Cosima inside. "You're not barging in, I invited you."
She installed Cosima at her skinny dining table. "I don't have anything exciting by way of breakfast foods except cereal or fruit if you're hungry."

Cosima glanced at the tiered fruit basket on the counter, currently displaying bananas, apples, oranges, and avocados. She smiled. "No, thanks, I'm not that hungry."

The kettle whistled and Shay turned off the stovetop while moving the kettle to sit on a cold coil. "Is green tea okay? Or do you want something stronger, like a black? I have English and Irish Breakfast. Or would you rather not have any caffeine at all? I have rooibos and herbals."

Cosima's smile jerked into a grin of amusement. "I like green."

With the water cooling down from boiling, Shay took her time to measure out three teaspoons of Dragon Well loose leaf into the teapot she'd laid out on a tray with two small, matching cups. She gave the water a little more time to lose heat, then poured it over the leaves in the basket. The whole arrangement was delivered to the table, where Shay discovered Cosima sitting with one foot pulled up and tucked beneath her, casual and comfortable as could be. Cosima turned one of the cups between her fingers, smiling. Within a minute Shay served two portions and fished out the basket of unfurled leaves from the water remaining in the pot.

Settled next to Cosima, hostess duties complete, Shay pressed her fingertips lightly against the side of the teacup to absorb the warmth and asked, "Do you want to talk about it?"

Cosima shook her head, not necessarily in a motion of denial, but with a rueful air. "There's nothing much to talk about, really. My... my family got wind of a secret and all hell broke loose. Like I mentioned: drama."

"It kept you up," Shay observed gently. "Was it your secret? Or one you were helping to keep?"

Cosima looked into the clear, light golden liquid in her cup. "Something like that. Any way you slice it, I got caught in the middle."

Shay cupped her chin in a hand and propped herself up on the tabletop. "Did everyone find out you're gay?"

Cosima laughed, seemingly delighted by the notion. "I couldn't hide that if I tried—and I didn't. That's old news; everyone knows." Cosima shook her head. "No, dude, it wasn't that." She sighed, tipping her cup carefully forward and back to swirl the liquid but not jostle it. "It was more like... knowledge kept on the downlow because it might upset some people. It got out and now everyone's worried."

"But you couldn't tell them before?" Shay asked.

Cosima breathed in deeply and exhaled in a sigh. "It's a problem and there's no solution yet, so I didn't see a point in mentioning it when the only outcome would have been to make people worry. Everyone's already dealing with a lot of problems, so I didn't want to add to everyone's stress. Not without, you know, having some kind of silver lining to offer."

"Is it a problem that affects everyone in your family?" Shay wondered.
"No," Cosima said. "Not yet. It could, I guess, but not yet." Cosima cleared her throat. "I guess . . . it made me feel shitty."

"What did? Hiding it?" Shay sipped the tea. It was a little under-steeped.

Cosima did a little double-take, the slightest jerk of her head. "Just . . . the whole situation. And having to talk about it. I didn't realize it was going to be such a big deal. I mean, I knew it was a big thing. I just wasn't . . . prepared. I didn't see the confrontation coming, which I realize now was stupid. And then to get that type of reaction—there were a lot of questions and I didn't have any answers." Cosima exhaled sharply through her nose. "I don't know why it got to me. It's not like I haven't been trying to find answers. You know? But I need time." Cosima paused. "I thought I would have more time."

Shay studied Cosima. "You must be exhausted. I think the first step now is to get some sleep. With some rest you'll be more clear-headed and you can give the problem another look."

Cosima nodded slowly. She took a sip of tea, then squinted at her cup.

"It needed to steep longer," Shay said, acknowledging the problem.

Cosima chuckled. "Thought it was maybe my tastebuds going." She drank a little more. "You're probably right. I should get into work but I'm not going to be much good if I'm a zombie."

"Just let Delphine know," Shay murmured.

Cosima gave her a sharp look. "Why, you think she'll be upset?"

Shay shook her head. "No. I just don't see any reason to worry her."

Cosima nodded grudgingly. "Yeah, I guess I've done enough worrying people for one twenty-four-hour period."

Shay rolled her eyes. "That's not what I meant."

Cosima smiled lopsidedly. "Yeah, you did. But that's okay."

"You're incorrigible," declared Shay. "I'm sending you up to bed before you get sillier."

They walked to the door, where Shay held it open and Cosima, head bowed in thought, made to step out. As Cosima crossed the threshold, Shay grasped her elbow. Cosima turned and lifted her head quizzically.

"Do you want a hug?" Shay asked softly.

Surprise and astonishment widened Cosima's eyes. "You offering?"

Shay spread her arms.

Cosima stared at Shay, on the verge of a baffled smile. Then there was the slightest slump in Cosima's shoulders and, wordlessly, Cosima stepped into Shay, one arm winding around Shay's back in a loose hold. Shay enfolded Cosima more securely and patted her back reassuringly.

"It'll be okay," Shay said softly, tightening her hold.

Chin upon Shay's shoulder, Cosima nodded. For a tick, Cosima squeezed back. Then she stepped away, a little bashful. Shay wished her a good night.
Cosima smirked. "You have a good day."

With one last little goodbye wave, Cosima went on her way. Shay lingered in the doorway, then closed it softly on the sight of Cosima's retreating back.

The message arrived before Delphine managed to get out of the door of her apartment.

From Cosima [07:07]: Going to come in late. Maybe in the afternoon.

Delphine's gut clenched in concern. Was Cosima feeling unwell? Was her body rejecting the stem cells? They'd be back to square one, step one, with less time on the clock to muster a new plan of approach.

To Cosima [07:07]: Are you okay? Are you in pain? Are you feeling sick?

From Cosima [07:08]: I'm fine. No pain. No irritation. Had a late night, so I'm going to catch up on sleep.

From Cosima [07:09]: I told you I'm a night owl. Don't sweat it.

Cosima's message was straightforward and, though a feeling of unease twisted about her middle, Delphine saw no reason that Cosima would lie—any spite or animosity Cosima felt for Delphine wouldn't extend that far. (Right?) Delphine sent a simple "OK" in acknowledgement and went into the DYAD according to her usual schedule. As she flashed her identification badge at the entrance, the security guard hailed her.

Aldous required her presence.

Delphine repressed a frown. Cosima's tardiness was just as well.

Aldous smiled tightly at Delphine when she stepped into his office and gestured to one of the chairs.

"Good morning, Delphine."

"Hello, Aldous," Delphine replied, sinking into a seat. On an impulse, she ventured, "How was the beer?"

Aldous smiled tightly. "Not to my tastes."

Which, Delphine had to admire, was an acceptable answer that provided nothing substantive—not whether he'd heeded Cosima's invitation or if anything transpired in the event that he had—but, if questioned by her, would draw suspicion and grounds for reproach.

He regarded her. "Perhaps you have more insight into this than I do."

Delphine put her confusion on open display. "The last I saw of Cosima was here, yesterday, before she went home."

"Home," Aldous repeated, tasting the word. "That's right. A bit of an unusual choice of residence, don't you think? Its location is not that convenient. Did you help her find it?"

Delphine shook her head. "No. Cosima found it on her own. I told her HR could help her find accommodations, but it seems she didn't solicit their help."

"I wonder why she chose that location, then," Aldous wondered aloud idly.
Delphine lifted a shoulder in a careless shrug, lips pursing with uncertainty. "For the style, perhaps? She is a bit . . . eccentric."

Aldous's eyes sharpened on her face. "Is that so? What do you think of her, now that you've gotten to know her better?"

Delphine pressed two fingers to her lips. "She's intelligent, curious, and knowledgeable—across a wide range of topics. But guarded." Delphine shook her head. "She doesn't trust me, Aldous."

Aldous's eyes narrowed on her in heightened scrutiny. Delphine's gut clenched. For one cold-sweat-triggering moment she thought he would give the order—go be a monitor. To the fullest. She knew what it would entail, but she didn't know if—her imagination could hear Cosima scoffing at her—she could—if she would—

But Aldous merely hummed in his throat.

"For the time being her health remains the top priority. But that doesn't mean you should slacken your vigilance."

Delphine swallowed to moisten her suddenly dry throat and nodded.

"There's a matter I wanted to run by you. Cosima mentioned that she could use a sequencing tech."

He scooped up a folder at hand, like the other countless nondescript manila folders that had become ubiquitous in their dealings. "If you recall, any incoming personnel is subject to our approval."

Delphine heard the "our" and at first thought it a generous allowance that Aldous enfolded her into the decision-making process. Upon further reflection she could see that it was a binding, segregating word choice—she and Aldous and DYAD together arrayed against the uncircumscribed: Cosima and the other subjects.

Delphine ran her eye over the résumé. "This . . . Scott Smith isn't from DYAD? In fact, he's still completing his advanced degree at—"

Delphine lifted her head. "—the University of Minnesota."

Aldous unveiled an impenetrable smile.

"The same university that Cosima attended?" Delphine asked, posing it more as a question than a statement. She wasn't versed in all the names of the individual states of the United States of America and there was a chance she was confusing any number of them. (She had no idea where Minnesota even was on a map.) But the light in Aldous's eyes lent confirmation. "Do they know each other?"

Aldous folded his hands, placed his elbows upon his desktop, and leaned forward. "When Cosima began to conduct research into her biology, she had to use the resources available to her. There's reason to believe that she enlisted Mr. Smith to help her."

Delphine cocked an eyebrow. "So he knows?"

"All our probes suggest that she didn't inform him as to the nature of her tests."

"Have you . . . vetted him?" Delphine asked carefully.

"Not in the manner you're thinking. He applied to us of his own volition. He actually has a letter of recommendation from his dean." A small laugh issued from Aldous. "It's not bad. His grades are good. He seems capable."

Delphine frowned. "But bringing him in would be introducing a foreign element, a—a foreign agent."
One you cannot be sure can be trusted. If he is to work closely with Cosima and myself, he would be exposed to very sensitive information. Is that a risk you're willing to take?"

"Better to ask if that's a risk he's willing to take," Aldous said serenely. "It's a position you should understand well. If he wants what's behind the closed door, he's going to have to take the plunge."

"But he'd be exposed to . . . everything," Delphine breathed.

"That, I suspect, will rather depend on Cosima."

Delphine sat back in her chair. After a moment, she nodded slowly. "You think Cosima will try to shield him from the entire truth. Whereas bringing in someone from among the DYAD personnel might encourage her to be wary of trusting, as she is with me." She studied Aldous flatly. "And, perhaps, if she takes him into her confidence, and if she won't be friends with me, she'll have ties of friendship with him." Her brow furrowed. "But . . . what evidence is there that he would cooperate with you in any event?"

As she wove her thoughts, Aldous broke into a slow smile. It was almost . . . warm.

"Well?" Delphine pressed, checking a desire to fidget.

"You're getting there," intoned Aldous. "Getting where? What did he mean by that? Aldous gave her no time to gather the will to ask. He pointed at the folder in her hands without unlacing his fingers. "What's your input?"

Delphine laid the file flat upon her lap and pressed her palms down upon the top of it. "I would urge you to hire on a criteria of skill and less, perhaps, based on his connections. We could use a good sequencing tech. But I don't know how Cosima will react to seeing a former colleague. She harbors a lot of animosity toward her previous monitor. If she suspects you've done the same to someone else she knows . . ." Delphine shook her head. "I don't know."

"But where would she go?" Aldous pointed out. "It may be that what she needs now is a friendly face."

"It's ultimately your decision," Delphine said. She placed the folder atop his desk. "Of course, you could always ask Cosima for her opinion."

"Perhaps she can have the final say," Aldous declared ambiguously.

Precisely what he meant by that, Aldous didn't bother to elaborate.

Cosima's absence in the lab always suspended Delphine in a strange sort of limbo. It wasn't that Cosima directed Delphine in her work or that without Cosima work couldn't be done. At times it felt like there was a mountain of work always casting a shadow over their efforts. Reams of data poured in from different sectors that potentially contained material bearing on their search, but which had to be reviewed and evaluated each in turn. No, Delphine's unease had little to do with completing work, with or without Cosima. But with Cosima out of sight—but not out of mind—an anxious anticipation set in the longer Delphine remained solitary, an expectation that at any moment Cosima would join her.

Delphine couldn't relax.

Ostensibly, yes, she was Cosima's supervisor, monitor, physician, all positions that should have
conferred a modicum of confidence and authority, but when she was alone like this, Delphine felt the
magnitude of the mental preparation she underwent to spend time with her subordinate, subject,
patient. With Jennifer, Delphine had had the screen of professional distance. If they chatted in a
friendly manner, Jennifer respected her always in her capacity as a physician. With Cosima it was a
fight to ward off or diffuse the other woman's attempts to make everything personal. Cosima came
with no warnings. Delphine had no inkling what the angle of attack would be, or when the trap
would spring, only the surety that confrontation was bound to occur at some point or another. She
knew Cosima was watching, waiting.

It was exhausting.

But only in these moments of calm did Delphine realize to what extent.

Delphine was aware of the irony.

The solitude did offer privacy. Out of idle curiosity and still mulling on her morning meet with
Aldous, Delphine made a search for Bobby's. The first result was a local cafe and bar that hosted
live, mostly indie, talent. Delphine didn't have much knowledge of Toronto's geographical makeup
to make much of the location. Pictures of the interior made her smile to imagine Aldous being forced
to patronize such an establishment, but she could easily imagine Cosima at the bar. She tried
substituting Jennifer and Greg in the setting and had a harder time of it, but not impossible. For that
matter, Shay wasn't a difficult fit, either; Bobby's appeared to be akin to the casual spots they used to
frequent in the early days of their friendship. Delphine almost wished she and Shay had discovered it
themselves.

She couldn't bring Shay there now.

While she was performing searches, Delphine tried running Scott Smith through Google, which was
shortsighted. Narrowing it down to the Scott Smith of the University of Minnesota offered
improvement, but none worthwhile. A handful of candidates popped up. Without more to go on,
Delphine abandoned the endeavor.

Cosima Niehaus proved a much more unique inquiry. Delphine wasn't sure what she had expected,
but presented with results, she hesitated. She wasn't sure why. The Internet was a public space.
Anything Delphine stumbled upon was, technically, fair game. With the amount of knowledge
Cosima had aired on DYAD's operations and history, Delphine assumed Cosima had run "Delphine
Cormier" through the bot crawlers.

Delphine paused. She opened another tab and ran her own name through Google. Results
associating her with DYAD were first and prominent. Farther down the list were hits on French sites,
passing mentions of her in university publications or notices of academic awards, an abstract of a
study to which she had contributed. There was even a picture of her and other interns posing eager
and sunny with Aldous featured proudly on the DYAD website in the portion highlighting career
opportunities.

Nothing new or surprising there.

Closing the tab returned her to Cosima's. Delphine contemplated the array of blue unvisited links.
After a moment, she closed that tab as well.

Maybe Cosima was waging a war, but Delphine wasn't. Not against Cosima. Not against DYAD.
Delphine was fighting a disease.
She got back to work.

At around three in the afternoon Cosima strolled into the lab. It was, Delphine supposed, more or less the time Cosima said she would arrive, as far as “afternoon” could be blanketed over the block of hours following noon, but a part of Delphine felt irked Cosima hadn’t bothered to send any sort of update over the course of the day, not even a quick missive to say she was heading in. Not that Delphine would have waited beyond the time she usually left the lab—but she would have informed Cosima of the fact.

Delphine knew on some rational level that her exasperation, such as it were, didn't derive from a sense of being snubbed by Cosima. Rather she found it difficult to understand how the intradermal test incubating in Cosima's skin hadn't impressed upon Cosima the same sense of urgency and impatience that it did in Delphine. Perhaps for Cosima literally carrying the answer in her arm and being able to gauge the results with a quick look and self-assessment dampened the mystery.

Cosima must have read the restlessness on Delphine's face because she didn't waste any time shedding bags, scarf, and coat upon the couch to brandish her arm as if she were displaying an additional tattoo. "Have a look."

Cosima confirmed she felt no fever, no pain, no discomfort. The injection site displayed no signs of irritation, no redness, no inflammation, barely an aberration to mark its spot. It was encouraging. A burst of relief and exaltation flooded Delphine. This was the first promising sign she'd seen in months.

She had to dare herself to believe it.

Cosima didn't share the sentiment, at least not to the degree it manifested in Delphine. Where Delphine couldn't suppress a smile, Cosima was subdued, gauging Delphine's reaction, as if trying to glean what her own reaction should be.

Smile fading, Delphine said to her reserved patient, "This is looking like good news. It'll only take a short time for an analysis of your blood to confirm compatibility."

Cosima nodded slowly. "Yeah, I know."

As she tied off Cosima's bicep, Delphine raked Cosima's face for clues. "Are you apprehensive about the actual treatment?"

Cosima smirked. "No, not really. I'm willing to try anything, even pumping the dental pulp of baby teeth into invasive and unmentionable places. I mean, we've already conducted the unsexiest gynecological exam possible, how much worse can it get?"

"I thought you would be a little more . . . excited," Delphine hazarded, swabbing a patch of Cosima's skin with alcohol.

Cosima surveyed Delphine's face surreptitiously. "I am. I mean, I get that finding a match was basically a minor miracle, given the chances are like a million to one."

Delphine arched an eyebrow at "minor miracle," even as she slid the needle into Cosima's arm. Cosima hissed. Jennifer had reacted the same way most times. Was there something indelicate and clumsy about Delphine's technique?

Delphine shook her head, both at Cosima's comment and her apparent "skill" at drawing blood.
"We've been searching our databases for a match for months. It may be that our persistence is finally paying off." She glanced into Cosima's face. "Perfect timing for you."

Cosima was quiet for a beat. "I mean it when I say that I wish you had found it sooner."

Delphine swapped the filled vial with an empty one. She kept her eyes on her task, perhaps to mask the flight of her thoughts to Jennifer. "As do I. But it could have taken longer, as well. So, you see, perfect timing."

Cosima sighed. "Maybe."

Delphine risked a frown in her direction. "What is it?"

Cosima shrugged her unclaimed arm. "There's a lot riding on this."

"Your life," Delphine breathed. "Yes, I know."

Cosima shook her head, as if Delphine had missed her meaning, and glanced away at the nearby computer monitor. Delphine waited for her to explain, but nothing further followed. Instead Cosima asked, "How come you didn't go into practicing medicine? You went through all the trouble of getting a medical degree."

"I considered it," Delphine admitted. "But then the DYAD entered the picture. I thought I would be able to . . . accomplish more with them."

"What, like you knew about the human cloning trials even then?"

Delphine shook her head as she drew the final vial. "I knew I wanted to research, but competition for spots at reputable hospitals is very high. Going that route would have taken me much longer to build a reputation and to find funding for anything I might have wanted to pursue, not to mention that I would have to fit in research alongside rotations. With the DYAD, I could focus on research and funding would be less of an issue. They're also able to move trials through various stages much more quickly and efficiently. Their ties with governments are very good and, since they are a multinational, the fields of research are much . . . broader."

"Right," Cosima said slowly. "I assume that line of thinking was from back when you thought they followed laws."

Delphine smiled tightly and pressed a cotton ball to the crook of Cosima's arm. Reaching up to hold it in place herself as Delphine undid the tie around her bicep, Cosima cocked her head and asked, "Or did whether or not they followed laws never matter to you? I mean, it is a tenet of Neolutionism that self-modification is a human right—and, by the logic that human rights are inalienable, governments shouldn't be able to deny or withhold them."

Delphine raised her eyes to meet Cosima's penetrating gaze. "Maybe I didn't care."

Cosima's gaze narrowed. "Didn't? But now you do?"

Delphine pivoted and backed up to grip and lean against the edge of the adjacent desktop, inhaled deeply, and released a long breath. "If you ask me why they pursue this or that line of inquiry, I can see the reasons, even if the only driving motivation is proof of concept." She gazed off toward the far side of the room. "I can't say I wouldn't do the same. Theory remains theory outside of the practical and provable. In medicine particularly. Even a cure for you is predicated on attempting something, because to do nothing only ensures one thing."
My death, yeah," Cosima provided blandly. "No need for euphemisms, Dr. Cormier. Though consider your attempt at bedside manner acknowledged."

Delphine attempted a smile that blinked into existence for but a second. "The DYAD is about opportunities. It's what I saw. It's what I took. It wasn't a forfeiture of my medical experience, but a redirection of it. I wanted to do medicine." Delphine nodded to herself. "I am doing medicine."

Cosima regarded Delphine. "Have you ever seen the entire genome—not the original, obvs, but one of ours?"

Delphine checked a laugh. "Any genome . . . makes for quite a long read."

Cosima smirked. "You know, when Leekie first made me an offer to work with DYAD—after we stopped pretending he didn't know anything and I didn't know anything—he gave me my entire genome. In fact, I have it with me." With her chin she indicated her bag.

Delphine followed her line of sight but returned her attention to Cosima with puzzlement. "Okay?"

"Here's the thing," Cosima said, "he claims it contains my entire genome, but it's missing a piece."

Delphine's brow contracted. "What do you mean?"

Cosima flexed her arm, lifted the cotton ball to check the clotting, then pressed it back into place. "We knew about Katja being sick. She was trying to get to us because she needed a doctor. So I had her and my DNA analyzed for any genetic markers of various diseases. At the same time, I had it sequenced for Cytochrome C. What came out was an anomaly and, within that, two differing sequences between my genome and Katja's. You follow?"

"Yes," Delphine said cautiously, "but I don't know where you're going."

"That piece was missing from the genome that Leekie gave me." Cosima leveled Delphine with earnest somberness. "He didn't want me to see it."

"So . . . that's why you don't trust him?" Delphine wondered. "Because you know he withheld information from you?"

Cosima broke into a vicious, toothy grin. "Oh, I didn't trust him from the beginning. You can't trust a man who's been spying on you your whole life." Cosima checked the cotton ball and then tossed it into the bin. "No, what I'm getting at is that even though the sequence bothered me at the time, I didn't have any way to go at it. Then everything happened so fast that—anyway, I started thinking about it again."

Delphine, following Cosima's logic but unsure where she herself entered the picture, said, "Yes?"

"The numbers they use to identify us," Cosima said slowly, "the ones on our files—"

Delphine nodded. "The tag numbers."

"Right, tags. Like you'd put on cattle."

"To differentiate you, yes."

"But we weren't cattle and they couldn't just brand us, so they encoded it in our DNA. That's the difference between my DNA and Katja's."

Delphine crossed her arms and nodded.
"But what's the rest of the sequence?" Cosima wondered. "Something Leekie didn't want me to see. Something that can be decrypted." Cosima licked her lips. "You want to help me find out what?"

They studied one another.

"You're asking me to help you?" Delphine asked softly.

"Yes," Cosima intoned. "I'm asking you, my monitor, to help me crack the code in a sequence of my DNA that was kept hidden from me."

"Why?" Delphine asked softly.

Cosima shrugged dismissively. "For science. To satisfy your curiosity. For the truth." Cosima threw up a hand. "Whatever floats your boat, Delphine."

"Even though I am your monitor," Delphine said, to put it on the table between them.

"You can say no," Cosima pointed out.

Delphine frowned. "You want to do this right now?"

"I think you should send those off to the lab first, but, yeah, why not? We're going to be waiting on the results, anyway." Cosima cocked her head. "So?"

Cosima had crafted a trial to rival any one of Aldous's loyalty tests. But she'd said to go with whatever reason Delphine preferred.

Delphine had questions, too.

*

The moment "324B21" spilled across the screen after what felt like increasingly complicated and senseless suggestions sent a thrill down Delphine's spine.

The code was, like much else about the design of the project, straightforwardly simple. Even Cosima's casual, but substantial knowledge of encryptions and ciphers was more impressive than the actual key to the protein encryption mystery.

But like the other parts of the project, the simplicity and obviousness in hindsight lent a breathtaking elegance.

Binary. Of course.

Zeros and ones.

Adenine-thymine. Cytosine-guanine.

Pure luck and arbitrary supposition landed them the correct correspondence of CG to zero and AT to one. Delphine wasn't sure they would have tried switching the two had gibberish spilled out using the reverse correlation.

"You cracked it," Delphine said, a little awed, not least because she felt transported back to the hot seat of Aldous's remonstrations: Think forward to address the hurdle, not backward trying to unravel the solution. Cosima had stumbled into the mode of thought with the ease of a fish slipping into water. Delphine sat momentarily trapped in the circuitous thought of the creation emulating a creator in the same way mankind strove to divine the purpose of gods and unseen forces—only the powers
at work here were all too human and limited.

The next task was far more tedious. The entire synthetic sequence was robust.

Delphine held the printout of the synthetic sequence and looked to Cosima. "Ready? Don't get confused."

Cosima smirked. "Don't lose your place."

Delphine rolled her eyes, but she tracked her progress with the tip of her fingertip.

0101010001001000010010010101001101011110100111101010010010001110100000101001110010010010101001101001101010111110100000101001110010011001000110100010000100011001000110001

They stared at the block of numbers sitting in the translator.

"Dude," Cosima said, "I hope we got that right."

"We can double check it," Delphine said, feebly.

"Honest question," Cosima said with a sideways glance, "would you go through that whole thing again and recheck each element?"

"I would," replied Delphine, "to ensure—"

Cosima clicked the convert button.

Legible, comprehensible text began to scroll onto a new line. Delphine felt a moment's relief. Then the substance of the words struck home.

THIS_ORGANISM_AND_DERIVATIVEGENETIC_MATERIAL_IS_RESTRICTED_INTELLECT

They both stared at the screen in silence.

Cosima spoke first. "The crazy thing is . . . I didn't expect that."

Delphine covered her mouth with a hand. She hadn't either.

"They patented us," Cosima said in a gasp of disbelief. "They patented us. Every single one of us."

She shook her head. "I thought, yeah, for sure the cloning technique would be proprietary, but . . . ."

She trailed off, then, with heat, "Is this even legal? How can you own—"

But she didn't finish the thought. Delphine understood why. A person, a human being, Cosima might have said, but for the first time the question of her status as such confronted them. In the legal sense.

Cosima looked to Delphine, as if for confirmation or negation or something, but Delphine could only shake her head.

She hadn't known.

She didn't know.

Cosima's jaw worked.

"You know what," Cosima spat, that familiar anger rising to smolder beneath the surface, "I'm not gonna think about it right now." She stood up and gathered up the external hard drive and her phone with jerky impatience. "It doesn't even matter. If we all get sick and die, it doesn't mean anything."
Delphine sat helplessly devoid of encouraging words. She wanted to say something to soothe the whirl of betrayal and resentment scurrying around the lab.

"We have the stem cell line now," Delphine offered weakly.

Cosima whirled. "DYAD's stem cell line. They probably patented that, too. If Leekie wants to dangle that out of reach on top of everything else, he can." She was breathing in fitful spurts. "And let's say it works. Then what? I take DYAD to court? Yeah, that'll go over well."

"First things still first," Delphine said, steadily, "we get you well again. Then we can figure out the next step."

Cosima arched an eyebrow. "'We'?"

Delphine moistened her lips. "You." She met Cosima's eyes steadily. "You can fight them, if that's what you wish, but you need to give yourself the chance, first."

"And if we can't?" retorted Cosima. "Is someone going to fight for us?"

Cosima waited. Delphine let the question hang suspended and untouched.

Cosima smirked halfheartedly and shrugged into her coat. "I'll see you tomorrow."

"Do you need a ride home?" Delphine asked as Cosima made for the door.

Cosima threw up a hand in refusal and farewell. Then she was gone and Delphine was alone with the decrypted message on the monitor and the myriad answers she might have given.

* *

Shay wondered if there was a point at which an unexplained knock on her door wouldn't startle, momentarily frighten, then all around puzzle (and sometimes irritate) her. Shay wasn't altogether sure she wanted to find out, but lately forces seemed determined to escort her to the brink of discovery. The culprit on the other side of the door this evening presented itself as a wine bottle brandished by a grinning upstairs neighbor.

"Whites, right?" Cosima said by way of very cheery, non-explanatory greeting.

A lengthy beat passed before Shay found her voice. "What's going on?"

Cosima tipped the bottle left, right, left, as if it were bobbing its corked neck in consideration. "Sorry about this morning, but thanks for humoring a sleep-deprived nerd?"

Shay shook her head but couldn't help an uncertain smile. "I was up. You came down for like ten minutes. It was hardly any trouble."

"It was first thing in the morning and you didn't have to invite me down at all," Cosima clarified. She thrust the offering forward. "Take the bottle of wine, Shay."

Shay took the wine, partly suspicious that Cosima would remain standing there all night otherwise. The label declared the variety a Riesling. It would fit right in among the bottles gathering upon the kitchen shelf. Shay smothered a laugh at the mental picture of her burgeoning provisions.

Cosima, watching her closely, pinged her reaction. "Is it okay?"

"Oh, yeah," Shay said quickly in reassurance. "Yeah, of course. Thank you. I was just thinking that
between you and Delphine, I'm going to have to get a wine cabinet."

Cosima raised an eyebrow. "Is Delphine in the habit of liquoring you up?"

Shay laughed. "No. She's in the habit of bringing over wine if she drops by."

"Beware of Greeks bearing gifts," Cosima murmured.

Shay cocked an eyebrow at her. "Then should I be wary right now?"

Cosima grinned, an expression on her that was far too mischievous to alleviate any undue suspicions.

Shay gave her an admonishing half-smile. "The Greeks were trying to get behind the walls of Troy. You don't need to deceive your way into my place."

"No?" Cosima asked, head tilting, like a dog shooting an inquiry at a befuddling bipedal.

Shay waited a beat, knowing she'd walked into her next words. "Do you wanna come in?"

Cosima swayed on the balls of her feet. "Only if it's not any trouble."

Shay held up the Trojan horse rent in shapely green glass. "Should I open it? Do you want some? I've got a few reds, if you prefer that instead."

"Open this one," Cosima said. Shay stepped aside to allow Cosima access. "So you don't have to add it to your collection."

Shay recoiled at the suggestion. "Are you offering to finish the bottle? Because I drink in moderation."

"Oh, yeah?" Cosima asked, giving the studio a thorough, indiscreet once over. "Delphine hasn't figured that out yet?"

"Actually," Shay said, "I think she finally did a little while ago."

"Damn," Cosima muttered.

Shay, fishing in a drawer for the corkscrew, shot her a questioning look across the dining table. "What?"

"I was hoping you'd say no so I could use her ignorance to justify my own behavior."

Shay laughed, albeit with a confused air. "Justify what kind of behavior?"

Cosima shrugged nonchalantly.

Shay studied her with wariness, because that kind of answer might not bode well. There was a slump to Cosima's posture, which might indicate listlessness or just poor posture (a trait that had been forced out of Shay, only for her to reject the correction in subsequent years, though now she automatically gauged it in others), but Cosima also swayed from foot to foot with an energy that was almost nervous. Shay didn't know what to make of it. Perhaps Cosima felt uncertain where to situate herself. Donning the role of hostess, Shay directed Cosima toward the chairs. "Do you want to have a seat? I'll be over in a second."

Cosima took her time making her way over to the lounging options. She'd been in Shay's apartment before, but Shay realized those had been stints of short duration. This was the first time Cosima was
taking in the space unrestricted and unhurried. She brushed a hand along the back of the couch as
she crossed behind along its length, then circled around to lower herself on the far end.

The cork came out with a satisfying, muted pop.

"Why white?" Cosima called over to her, though her eyes wandered over other sectors of the space.

"What do you mean?" Shay asked. With the wine breathing, Shay checked the fridge for anything
that might pair with it.

"The common wisdom is that red wines confer more health benefits."

Shay smiled to herself. There was a sizeable wedge of brie among the cheeses, so Shay plopped it on
a serving plate and plucked an apple from the fruit basket. "Maybe that's because the possible
benefits of white wine aren't as well studied. White wine may have its own undiscovered perks."

The sound of water running into the sink as Shay rinsed the apple arrested Cosima's attention, and
under her guest's curious eyes Shay sliced the apple into commendably thin, if not equally sized,
portions. After a moment, Cosima smiled. "So, if the health benefits remain undiscovered, that's not
the reason you drink white instead."

Shay smiled to herself as she transferred slices of apple from cutting board to plate, along with a
cheese knife. "I can't just prefer the taste?"

"That's what I was wondering," Cosima said.

Shay tipped wine into glasses and let them sit while she bore the plate over. "I try to eat healthy, yes,
but I don't cut out enjoyment. I find whites go better with the fruits and cheeses I like to eat. Besides,
the less to stress out about, the better. Life's too short."

Cosima's mouth twitched. "Yeah, it is." Cosima considered the plate. "Do you always do this?"

"I try to," Shay declared as she returned on her second trip with wine glasses, deflecting any shame
or judgment being cast in her direction. She held out a glass to Cosima, who took it and promptly
curled up on the couch, her shoes already sitting shod on the floor. Shay settled into the single seater.
"I had a Korean friend whose mom always put out these fruit spreads whenever they had guests
over. Everything was skinned and sliced. I loved it."

"Huh," Cosima said. "I had an Asian girlfriend, but she never did anything like that. Then again, she
was a punk rocker."

"You dated an Asian punk rocker?" Shay asked, on the verge of exclamation.

"What, you haven't?" Cosima fired back.

Shay laughed. "Can't say I have. I haven't been that . . . fortunate? Is this a California thing?"

Cosima shrugged. "We California girls aren't half bad."

Shay arched an eyebrow. "Is that so?"

Cosima paused, a brief cloud of uncertainty shadowing her features.

"What?" Shay prompted.

Cosima shook her head, turning to her left. "Why don't I have a bathtub in the living room of my
unit?"

Shay laughed. "You're unfortunate."

Cosima studied her out of the corner of her eye. "Did you install it?"

"Oh, jeez, no," Shay said. "I found the place with it already there."

Cosima twisted further in her seat. "Did you find your bed on a wooden palette, too?"

"Hey, that took careful construction," Shay asserted, playfully affronted.

"Yeah?" Cosima asked. "Did you do it yourself? Banged it together with wood shop skills?"

"What if I did?" challenged Shay.

Cosima turned to her, grinning. "Such a lesbian."

"Takes one to know one," Shay countered, sipping at the wine.

Cosima's grin stretched just a bit wider.

Shay picked up a slice of apple and savored the clean crunch. She licked her lips and asked softly, "Feeling better?"

Cosima nodded slowly, cradling her glass of wine close. "Yeah. Maybe. Today was glass mostly empty, glass half empty, glass maybe half full . . ." Her eyes passed fleetingly over Shay's face. "Hoping it can settle on the full side now." Her gaze sharpened on a point beyond Shay. "All my plants got left behind."

Shay's features pinched in an almost frown. "Why?"

Cosima shrugged. "No idea. I guess the movers didn't want to bother. Maybe they thought the pots would be too fragile bouncing around in the back of the trailer or maybe they didn't want to risk spilling soil everywhere. Although . . . the little succulents I had could be packed into one of the boxes, but I haven't stumbled on any."

Shay glanced at one of the smaller pots. "Do you want one of these guys to keep you company?"

"Do they keep you company?" Cosima asked.

Shay smiled down at the floor, a little sheepish at having her word choice turned on her. "In the best possible way. They don't take up any oxygen and they're as eager to soak up sunlight as I am."

"Aw, dude," moaned Cosima, "that's like the exact opposite of everything I am. Does that make me akin to the worst company?"

"I don't know yet, it's too soon to say," Shay teased lightly. She set her wine glass aside carefully upon the floor. Straightening up, she leaned upon the armrest. "Are you always this silly?"

"What are you talking about?" Cosima snatched up a slice of apple and waved it belligerently. "I'm brilliant."

Shay nodded solemnly. "I don't doubt that." She smirked. "But it doesn't mean you can't be silly."

"What's wrong with being silly?" Cosima asked.
"There's nothing wrong with being silly."

Cosima grinned. "Okay, then, yes, I'm silly."

Shay's brow dimpled. "What if I'd said there was something wrong with being silly?"

Cosima went stone-faced. "Then I would never be caught dead being silly."

Shay shook her head, smiling. "Is this the sleep deprivation talking?"

"Dude, sleep deprivation doesn't talk," Cosima corrected, putting on an air of professorial seriousness. "At best it sort of mumbles and slurs, sometimes trails off mid-thought."

Shay's smile deepened. "You're silly."

Cosima bit at her lower lip, then broke eye contact to glance around the room. "Quick question."

"What's up?"

"A beautiful woman isn't going to walk through the door any second and chastise me, right?"

For one fleeting, erroneous second, Shay imagined Delphine striding in. But Shay recovered in the next moment with a wry smile. "Chastise you for what?"

Cosima took a second to choose her words. "For monopolizing your time."

Shay shook her head slowly. "No. No one like that's going to show up." She twitched an eyebrow at Cosima. "What about you?"

One side of Cosima's mouth pulled up to reveal a sharp canine. "Dude, long distance never works."

Shay felt a sympathetic smile touch her lips. "You left someone behind in Minnesota?"

Cosima's lips stretched into a toothy grin. "Minnesota? No, dude, try Berkeley."

* * *

Just beyond the door, as Shay was seeing her out, Cosima stopped and turned, head hung so that she looked at Shay from an oblique angle. "Hey."

Shay smiled in question.

"Could you—do you think I could have another one of those hugs?"

Shay's smile relaxed. "Yeah, sure. C'mere."

She crossed to Cosima, whose arms went about her with a tick of hesitation, almost shyness. Shay felt no such compunctions. Her arms closed on Cosima like a bear trap, until Cosima eased into her hold.

Shay felt the cough reverberate through Cosima's frame.

She loosened her hold and Cosima took that as a sign to separate, one hand flying up to cover her mouth.

"You okay?" Shay asked.
Cosima nodded, close-mouthed, a bashful smile trying to fight for control of her lips. When the
cough settled, she cleared her throat and said, a bit gravelly, "Yeah. Sorry." She stood looking a
moment at Shay. She smiled. "Thanks."

"No problem," Shay said.

Cosima's eyes skimmed across Shay's. "Good night."

Shay nodded. "Good night."

*

From Delphine [11:08]: Hey.
To Delphine [11:08]: Hey.
To Delphine [11:10]: What's up?
From Delphine [11:12]: Nothing.
From Delphine [11:12]: Good night.
To Delphine [11:14]: Good night.
Delphine wanted a cigarette. After the accident she'd kicked the habit—not out of considerations for her health or a newly minted gratitude to be alive, but because nursing a hip injury turned going out to buy a pack of cigarettes or toddling around to search for her misplaced lighter into cumbersome inconveniences that incited more pain than was assuaged by the scant single serving size of nicotine. Painkillers had been more readily at hand in those days, anyway, and by the time she'd weaned off of those, she'd grown accustomed to not plumbing her pockets for a rolled slim. It was probably for the best. At the very least, on top of saving a few dollars, no longer smoking likely had spared her choice looks of gentle disapproval from Shay—maybe had even tipped the scales toward the degree of tolerance that had given their friendship a chance.

But last night, lying in bed, the oblivion of unconsciousness elusive while her thoughts circled the genetically encoded patent and the burden of knowledge, of secrets and obligations and divisions being drawn, Delphine would have liked a cigarette. Curled up in a chair beside the window. Or in bed, the lit end blazing briefly in the dark with each pull, the nicotine like a soothing hand running down her spine, quelling the nervous signals rushing thereabout. She would have liked one now, weary and muddled, jittery rather than rejuvenated from the caffeine in the espresso she'd ordered from a cafe just grinding the day's first batch of beans for the few zombie figures swaying on their feet huddled around the pickup counter.

Smoking wasn't permitted in the care ward, however.

She doubted Jennifer would appreciate it.

If Jennifer could have exercised the cognitive faculties to notice.

Delphine rubbed at her eyes. A cigarette really did sound lovely.

She wasn't sure why she was here. She'd tipped out of bed at an hour nominally in the morning, casting aside the duvet and sheets in impotence and resignation, tired of chasing after sleep, and spilled herself into the shower, where she let the water run hot and long so that a murky, misty tiled otherworld enfolded her upon stepping out of the tub. She'd dressed, because what else was there to do, and, following that logic, had simply headed out into the impending day. Only there was nowhere really to go after wandering into a cafe, except into the DYAD, where the lonely stillness would have rendered her a phantom but for the security guard at the front who nodded in acknowledgement of her entrance. In the old wing the lab was quiescent and waiting. Cosima would likely not appear for hours yet. Delphine simply stood in the space for a time. Then she'd walked out and wended through the halls.

Jennifer's room was not quiet, despite the occupant's silence. Delphine sat squeezed into the shadows of the darkened room, dumped into the only available chair, the one she thought of as the property of Greg, and let the rhythm beat out by the monitors regulate the pace of her breathing.

If Jennifer were conscious, what might Delphine be doing instead? Would she and Jennifer be speaking? What would they converse about? What would Delphine tell Jennifer?

Maybe about her current patient, in the vaguest of terms. She could say that her new charge possessed traits that reminded her of Jennifer, maybe that they shared similar accents to her ear, what Delphine's aural recognition deemed generically American, even though the chosen topics of discourse Jennifer and her new patient touched on were vastly different. That, really, what a superficial similarity—they were different people. No comparison necessary.
But better to discuss that than the common affliction shared by Jennifer and Cosima that Delphine couldn't have mentioned. Because Delphine could not have spoken about the stem cell line, that there was a plausible treatment being developed, not when it wasn't within Delphine's authority to extend the trial to Jennifer.

Not when Delphine wasn't sure, if given the choice between testing implantation on Jennifer or Cosima, whom she would have chosen.

Delphine rubbed at her eyes.

When she stepped out of the room, she checked her phone for the time, considered, then sent a message to Shay: *Let's do something this weekend.*

An answer arrived within a minute.

From Shay [06:22]: Good morning. Thursday is barely starting and u r ready for the weekend?
To Shay [06:22]: Yes.
From Shay [06:23]: ;P
From Shay [06:23]: What do u want to do?
To Shay [06:23]: I don't know. Anything.
From Shay [06:24]: K. Think about it. U have time to come up with smthg.

Delphine flashed a feeble smile at the screen. She barely had the wherewithal to stand up straight, much less the mental capacity to think of possible weekend activities. A nurse bustled past. Delphine raised her head enough to catch a sideways glance. It was Gina, she of the gentle hands and the beloved dogs. Delphine caught her eye and said, "Hello. Will Greg be coming in later?"

Gina stopped, an odd look creasing her normally genial features. "Greg . . . hasn't come in for a while now, Dr. Cormier."

"What?" Delphine said, too tired to stop herself, maybe too tired to compute what was being said.

Gina shook her head. "Don't ask me, Dr. Cormier. I just know I haven't seen him."

Delphine stared at her in wordless incomprehension, for long enough that Gina eventually shrugged with a shake of her head and went on her way. Delphine stared after her, trying to understand.

Where was Greg?

*"The results of Cosima's blood analysis were in Delphine's inbox by eight. Delphine clutched them in hand as she sat in Aldous's office, in his chair where it stood unoccupied behind the desk, the back turned like a shield against the room so that Delphine faced the windows and beheld the framed vista as she had numerous times before.

This morning the view didn't arrest her to the same degree as on previous occasions.

Aldous's arrival occurred as the lone disturbance of sound. Delphine tracked his progress by ear, his path coming around the desk, the stutter and abrupt stillness of his footsteps when into his line of sight she appeared, ensconced in the chair.

"Delphine," Aldous acknowledged. "You've seen the results?"

"Have you?" Delphine asked."
"We'll move to implantation," Aldous said by way of confirmation. "At the soonest, probably Monday or Tuesday. I'll see to the arrangements and let you know."

Delphine nodded. "Aldous." She swiveled the chair a few degrees to look at him. "Where's Greg?"

Aldous graced her with a raised eyebrow laced with incredulity. "Where do men who are overwhelmed by grand circumstances go?" He shook his head slightly. "Away. Greg cut his losses. He probably thought there was nothing left for him here."

Delphine sat expressionless, as much due to delayed response from lack of sleep as to general lack of understanding. "He . . . returned home? To the United States?"

"His business is his business," Aldous said lightly, with a hint of a shrug.

Delphine frowned in the slow churning of her thoughts. "Will you monitor him?"

Aldous smiled or smirked or maybe both. "What's there to monitor?" He gave the slightest shake of his head. "It doesn't matter. Greg isn't of interest to us and he wasn't looking after Jennifer. We are. Greg has no bearing on that." His eyes coolly assessed her. "Maintain focus, Delphine. Stick to the task at hand. Cosima is your subject."

Delphine schooled her features into what she hoped was neutrality. She lifted the papers she held in one hand in a simulacrum of a salute. "We'll be ready."

She lumbered out of his chair and left without another word.

*  

Delphine composed a concise, straightforward, but also sufficiently vague email to Cosima:

> Lab results positive. Moving to implantation. Procedure will most likely be scheduled for early next week. -DC

She didn't have to send Cosima an email—she would be seeing Cosima later in the day, presumably—but she felt it better to inform Cosima immediately. She herself would have wanted to know as soon as the information were available.

It wasn't that Delphine needed Cosima to trust her, per se, but getting along well enough to work together respectfully, if not amicably, would be nice. She had a brief vision of Shay's presence seated in the corner of the lab forcing her and Cosima to play civil—Delphine almost laughed.

Aldous hadn't left her much to do in the way of preparation so Delphine spent some time taxing her mind trying to remember Greg's last name. The more she rooted about for it, she realized she couldn't recall ever seeing it or hearing it. She hesitated. Facebook wasn't a territory she frequented often. Networking was one thing, socializing another. She may have had little information on Greg, but she had a tidbit or two about Jennifer Fitzsimmons.

Delphine found Jennifer easily enough. That was about as far as she got. Nothing about Jennifer's profile was public. Delphine smiled to herself, albeit sadly. At least in something Jennifer had been able to maintain privacy.

But that left the mystery of Greg up in the air.

Just as Aldous wanted it.
At some point, not long after noon, Delphine curled up on the couch of the quiet lab, ceased resisting leaden weight upon her eyelids, and lost time. She opened her eyes to Cosima standing over her. Delphine's heart leapt, hand flying up in a fist over its frantic effort.

Cosima smirked. "Sleeping on the job?"

Delphine simply lay on the couch waiting for her heart to slow and her breath to calm. Wrestling back some grace and dignity, she swung her legs over the edge of the cushions to plant her heels upon the floor while pushing herself up into a sitting position. "What time is it?"

Her voice emerged cracking and husky.

Cosima's smirk deepened. "Around two."

"Ah, merde," Delphine muttered, covering her face with a hand. Sighing, she pushed back her hair and looked up at Cosima, whose smirk seemed to be attempting to dig a Marianas Trench into her features. "Did you just get in?"

"Maybe I did, maybe I didn't," Cosima said blithely, eyes sparkling behind her glasses.

Clearing her throat and willing moisture over her dry tongue, Delphine remarked, "You weren't here before twelve."

"But I arrived just in time for this," Cosima said, holding up her phone. With the screen pointed toward her, Delphine discerned a picture of herself crammed onto the couch, head lolling, lips parted.

Delphine considered it with a blend of resignation and exasperation. "Not my best angle."

Cosima swiped to the next picture. "I got a close up, too." She turned it back around to admire her photography skill. "Is there like a DYAD Facebook group? I think they might appreciate this." Her mouth pulled in contemplation. "Maybe Shay?"

Delphine rubbed at her neck, then her shoulder, which had cricked and cramped in the mold of unnatural angles, and wished Shay were there to rub out the discomfort. "She could use the smile, though it probably wouldn't be much of a remarkable sight to her."

Cosima twitched an eyebrow at her. "The sight of you unconscious is a familiar one to her?"

Delphine flashed an ambiguous smile. Cosima hadn't quite hit the mark, but over the course of their sessions Shay had seen far more of Delphine than simply her in a state of unconsciousness. Though there'd been that, too. And that time she'd passed out in Shay's apartment. Shay had also experienced Delphine reduced to grandmotherly efforts of speed and movement.

Thinking about it, Shay had witnessed a number of Delphine's less than stellar moments. Aggregating a quick mental tally, Delphine wasn't sure they were equally matched in moments of self-exposure, vulnerability, and debilitation.

Delphine's immediate thought was that this state of affairs needed to be rectified. Only her second thought was: Why put Shay through that?

Cosima's lips pursed in rumination. "Well, I'll keep these just in case."

"In case of what?" Delphine let herself ask, perhaps because she was groggy and still in the throes of
grasping at operational consciousness.

Cosima shrugged.

Delphine's third wish of the day—after, one, a cigarette and, two, a massage from Shay—was that Cosima weren't so eager to behave in a disconcerting manner (and with distressing efficacy) to express her opinion of DYAD's methods. By any rational measure, it was difficult to fault a victim of systematic violation of privacy, but it was grating to be the target of Cosima's antics. Maybe subjection to such antics was why Aldous communicated with Cosima through Delphine.

Cosima stowed her phone and gave Delphine another assessment. "Maybe you should have come into work late."

"It wouldn't have served any purpose," Delphine said.

With a flick of her chin, Cosima indicated the papers sitting on the couch where Delphine's loosening fingers had dropped them. "What were you looking at?"

Delphine hesitated, reaching over to lay her fingers upon the printed pages. "Articles on patent law." Cosima's jaw squared. Delphine shook her head. "Unfortunately I pursued studying medicine, not law. I'm not sure what to look for."

Cosima's stiff chin bobbed up and down. "Yeah, I had the same problem." Her head tilted in thought. "Maybe one of us is a lawyer. There has to be a pretty good chance of that."

Delphine stifled a laugh. "Yes, but versed in which law? Mexican? Norwegian? South African? The patent appears to have been written according to the American legal code, but even if it were legal according to laws of the United States, I wonder if it could apply to citizens of other countries."

"Things aren't citizens," Cosima pointed out. "The question is more like whether or not we're . . . subhuman. How much artificial DNA does it take to classify an organism into another category—a different, ownable species?" Cosima lifted an eyebrow. "What do you think?"

Delphine ran her tongue over her lips. "I can see an obvious argument against measuring by genetic percentage when the bulk of naturally occurring human DNA is already largely noncoding."

Cosima crossed her arms. "But if what Leekie said is true and these artificial sequences make us clones possible, they serve a biological function. They're critical to our existence. So to possess such DNA could probably be presented as having bearing in a legal definition. Big agro companies are already lobbying to be able to patent GMO seeds as proprietary property. If that goes through, why not extend that argument to other deliberately modified specimens? Wouldn't that be the obvious argument from any DYAD lawyer?"

Delphine nodded, grave. "I know. I had similar thoughts."

Cosima frowned. After a moment, she said, "Dude, that does not make me feel better."

"I'm sorry," Delphine offered sadly. "I told you, I studied medicine, not law."

Cosima's mouth pressed into a thin slash. "And there wasn't any good medical reading for you to pass the time with?"

"Did you get my email?" Delphine asked. "The lab results came back positive." She nodded, pushing herself to her feet to fetch the papers. "Your numbers are good, too. If they weren't, I would press Aldous to move faster, but we're still looking at proceeding next week."
She laid the papers out for Cosima to inspect. Cosima slowly made her way over to Delphine's side and stood quietly gazing down at the array, left arm wrapped around her middle, the elbow of her other arm balanced perpendicular atop the back of her wrist, fingers prodding at her lip. She turned to Delphine with an open expression. "So . . . you studied medicine but I didn't. I flirted with the idea, but it didn't mesh for me. Can you explain to me everything I'm looking at?"

A frisson of surprise lanced through Delphine. They'd gone over analyses of Cosima's blood tests before and at no point had Cosima expressed any unfamiliarity with the specifics. After a moment, a smile, soft and a little relieved, touched Delphine's lips.

"Yes, of course."

Cosima suggested Delphine "cut out early" but Delphine shook her head. A brief reconsideration prompted Delphine to instead ask, "Would you like the lab to yourself?"

Cosima shrugged. "I was thinking you could use some shut eye."

"Thank you," Delphine said slowly, trying to gauge and trying to stop herself from gauging the consideration Cosima was extending. "The nap helped. And hopefully I will sleep much better tonight."

Cosima nodded, a gesture that to Delphine's powers of detection broadcasted indifference. The moment passed and with it Delphine's sense of equilibrium. She and Cosima seemed always to teeter, now up, now down, and where the scales balanced in any given moment was hard to determine. Maybe they had inched toward better terms. Maybe this was a momentary ceasefire, like the breaks soldiers in their trenches honored on holidays.

They worked quietly in the late parts of the day, absorbed in their own projects. Cosima leafed through the articles on patent law that Delphine had been browsing earlier. Delphine browsed the medical profiles of other clone subjects in an idle fashion, an exercise in attempting to see if anything would jump out to her sluggish mind. Nearing the time Delphine would usually pack up, her mind wandered back to the morning.

"Cosima," Delphine broached the relative quiet cautiously, "may I ask you something about your previous monitor?"

Cosima, on the couch with her legs pulled up beneath her, lifted her head. Wariness and curiosity mingled in an uncomfortable mix. "Yeah?"

"Have you spoken to her since or . . . know of her current whereabouts?"

"Why, you want to contact her and compare notes, get some pointers?" Cosima's eyes narrowed. "Shouldn't you have that information already?"

Delphine shook her head. "I was just wondering."

Cosima cocked her head. "Why?"

Delphine shook her head again.

Cosima's scrutiny zeroed in on Delphine. "Why are you asking me and not Leekie?" One corner of her mouth pulled up. "Are you embarrassed to ask him?" Her expression turned more cynical. "Or maybe you think he'll lie to you?" Her eyes raked Delphine's face. "Or maybe you're just afraid?"
The frivolity fled Cosima's features. "What are you afraid of, Dr. Cormier?"

Delphine didn't flinch away. "I don't know."

But she had a suspicion and maybe what she feared was having Cosima confirm it.

* *

This time a message presaged any knocks on Shay's door.

From Delphine [7:15]: May I come in?
To Delphine [7:15]: Right now? Sure.

"Hey," Shay greeted Delphine at the door a few minutes later. "Did you come over to announce our weekend plans?"

The slight smile on Delphine's face stiffened and faded incrementally. "I forgot about that." The smile recovered some vigor. "No, I drove Cosima home. Hello."

"You know that you don't need an excuse or an explanation to drop by, right?" Shay asked as Delphine leaned toward her. Shay automatically turned her head to receive a kiss upon first one, then the other cheek.

"I know," Delphine said as she pulled back and maneuvered inside, "but I don't want to be an inconvenience or catch you at a bad time."

Delphine said it without emphasis or inflection, but Shay felt caught between guilt, appreciation, self-consciousness, and a slice of irritation. She summoned a smile to cover up the emotional morass. "You can always go up to Cosima's."

Delphine's mien turned grim. "That would probably be the least productive course of action."

Shay shook her head, partly at herself. She knew she shouldn't tease. But she also knew that making sense of the two had yet to bear any fruit in the landscape Shay could make out. "Do you want something to eat or drink?"

Delphine shed bag and coat at the coat stand. "Are you having anything?"

"Sure, I'll join you if you're having something."

"Do you still have the whiskey?"

"Do I still have the whiskey?" Shay echoed, incredulous. "Do you imagine me taking a tipple of it every now and again?"

"Tipple?" Delphine repeated, head canting, caught on the hook of confusion.

"A drink. Add it to your vocabulary," Shay teased. "You want it neat or on the rocks?"

"With ice, please."

Delphine sat down at the table, lowering herself with a circumspection and languish that Shay parsed in a glance. Shay joined her with a tumbler of whiskey and a glass of pinot grigio for herself.

"You okay?" Shay asked. "Is your hip bothering you?"
Delphine smiled with a tired self-deprecation. "I slept in a bad position. My body is making me pay for it."

"Do you want to go for a walk?" Shay asked.

"What?" Delphine countered.

"Do you want to go for a walk and stretch out?" Shay clarified.

"In this weather?" Delphine asked.

"We have coats," Shay said. "The result of years of human ingenuity and—" Shay smiled. "—science. You can fortify yourself with a few sips of that, too."

On cue Delphine sipped at her whiskey, eyeing Shay speculatively. Putting down her drink, she asked, "Would you really go for a walk right now?"

"I wouldn't have suggested it otherwise."

Delphine's eyes narrowed in consideration, but in time she shook her head. "If it were earlier, perhaps. I'll just have to endure the consequences of my poor choices."

"The other option," Shay pointed out, "is to stay inside and stretch."

"You mean do yoga," Delphine said.

"We could work up to that," Shay agreed with a smile.

Delphine shook her head chidingly.

Letting her off the hook, Shay changed the topic. "Any ideas for the weekend?"

"I'll think of something," Delphine reassured her. With a fingertip she wiped away a gathering drop of condensation on the exterior of the glass. "Shay, do you stay in touch with your exes?"

Shay responded with her mind's first association: "Did an ex of yours appear today?"

Delphine smiled, a reflex of surprise, but with amusement lighting her eyes. "No. I don't really stay in touch with my exes. The practice tends to be mutual."

"Okay," Shay said slowly, "just trying to see where this is coming from."

"I'm not thinking about my exes," Delphine supplied.

"You're thinking of my exes?" Shay asked with uncertainty.

Delphine laughed, clearly startled. "No, I'm thinking about your relationship with your exes." Shay's expression must have contorted into an interesting display because Delphine tried to amend, "I mean that I'm not curious about who your exes are, but what kind of relationship you maintain with them now." She tracked Shay's reaction. "This is not sounding any better, is it?"

"No, not really," Shay confirmed. She twirled her glass of wine by its base. "To answer your question, though, I keep in touch with some of my exes. It just depends. Sometimes the relationship was already transitioning into something more like a friendship by the end anyway."

"So you talk with them? Know where they are? What they are up to?" Delphine asked.
"Sometimes," Shay said. "With a few I'm still close. Facebook helps in that you don't even have to engage with someone to know what they're up to." She licked her lips. "Why exes specifically?"

Delphine hesitated. "It came up."

"With Cosima?" Shay said, a little surprised at the notion. She didn't imagine Cosima was shy or taciturn about her sexuality, but the idea that she'd shared that with Delphine did throw Shay for a loop. It seemed intimate for two people determine to put nothing less than a Bering land bridge between them.

"No," Delphine said, eyes on the tumbler. "I was looking at the case of a previous patient I had." Her eyes flickered up to Shay and whatever she saw in Shay's expression made her ask, "What?"

Shay took a deep breath. "I don't know if you realize it, but I try very hard not to ask you too many questions. And right now I have like a million questions."

"Yeah?" Delphine asked, adjusting on the seat, her tone taken aback. "Like what?"

"Like . . . was this previous patient an ex of yours?" Shay asked.

Delphine smiled faintly. "No."

"Okay," Shay managed in a drawn out drawl, "so what in the world about this patient made you think of exes?"

Delphine's lips pursed. "I heard that her partner left her. He used to always come with her to her appointments and they seemed so . . . devoted. Hearing about their separation . . . made me sad. I wondered if . . . " Delphine tilted her head. "I wondered if a relationship like that could just end. Without . . . repercussions."

"You mean like material repercussions, or emotional ones? Like lingering feelings?"

Delphine nodded slowly, offering nothing to provide clarification.

"Breakups can be hard," Shay said, knowing it sounded obvious and trite. She regarded her friend. "Some people need a clean break, others settle into different arrangements."

"Yes," Delphine agreed softly. She met Shay's eyes. "Do you worry about the welfare of your exes?"

"In a general way, yeah, sure," Shay said.

Delphine tapped the glass with a fingernail, sending off a sharp ping. "I don't think much about my exes."

"Clean break," Shay reiterated.

Sorrow tugged at Delphine's mouth.

"Why did you look sad just now?" Shay asked softly.

Delphine brought the tumbler to her lips, ice cubes shifting in soft clinks, and sipped. "It's hard to think that my former patient's illness didn't have something to do with their separation."

Shay's mouth thinned into a line. "Yeah. It's—it's probably tough."
Delphine caught the stutter. She looked at Shay with that unnerving clinical assessment.

Shay bit at her lower lip. "Did she get better?"

"No," Delphine murmured. "Not yet."

Shay nodded. "Maybe it became too much for him." Delphine ducked her head. Shay felt a rush of tenderness for her friend. "Is that why you were wondering if I keep tabs on my exes?"

Delphine's lips pressed into a slash of consternation. "I wonder if he worries about her, yes. Or maybe . . . maybe he can't."

"Can't?" Shay asked.

Delphine raised her eyes to Shay's. "I'm not sure what I'm saying." Her gaze lingered, seeming to search for something. To Shay's surprise, a smile unfurled across her lips. "How are you?"

"What?" Shay said in a near gasp at the abrupt pivot.

"I feel like I haven't asked you that in a while," Delphine said. "How is work? Any luck with, um, Sapphire?"

Shay exhaled a curt laugh. "Everything's fine. And, no, no luck on that front. I decided to take a break from searching. It was getting a little depressing."

The final word snagged Delphine's ear with a little jerk. "And that's . . . okay?"

Shay smiled. "Yeah? I haven't really noticed one way or another. Especially lately. You and Cosima have kept me busy."

"Is that okay?" Delphine asked, with greater uncertainty. "That we've . . . kept you busy?"

"I'd let you know if it wasn't," Shay said.

"I worry that you wouldn't," Delphine countered in a soft, but frank tone, eyes careful upon Shay.

They studied one another, their relationship a foundation beneath their feet turned jelly and elastic. Shay always felt Delphine perceived more than she let on. What Delphine ascertained was a question of depth, not probability, and Shay had become accustomed to the opacity of Delphine's thoughts. She had little practice with how to dance with a thought tossed into the open.

"Come on," Shay said in an attempt at levity, "haven't I closed the door on your face before?"

"Yes," Delphine breathed. "Once." She gave the tumbler a spin between her fingers. "You say you want to ask me a lot of questions, but sometimes I feel it's difficult to ask you even the simplest ones."

Shay measured her breaths, unprepared for the tightening of her stomach, the acceleration of her heart. "What do you mean?"

Delphine swiped a slash through the condensation. "If I ask how you are doing, you almost always say that you are fine or okay, and I wonder if that's true—or if you say that because it's the polite answer by social standards and it's the path of least resistance." Delphine nudged the tumbler so that it caught the light at a different angle. "But then I think: If one day you said you weren't fine, what would I do? How could I help you? Could I help you? And I see that you make it easy for both of us."
"But," Delphine continued, volume bleeding from the projection of her voice, "when an issue is troubling me, I find myself coming to you. You don't need to ask for me to talk. I know you will listen. But I can't ask you to do the same with me." Her eyebrows pinched toward one another. "I'm not sure you need to."

"Your life seems way more stressful than mine," Shay allowed.

"That doesn't mean I should burden you," Delphine said.

"You don't burden me," Shay said. "To unburden yourself doesn't necessarily mean you burden someone else. I don't feel like I have to solve your problems. I mean, I have questions, yeah, but really all I do is listen."

Hesitation pulled at Delphine's mouth, but she merely shook her head. "I worry about you, too, you know."

Shay clamped down on the objection that leapt reflexively to her tongue. Because she repeatedly told Delphine not to worry. Because this conversation was something different between them. Delphine was saying something different, but exactly what Shay couldn't pinpoint, only able to recognize how it sent a flutter along her nerves.

"I'm doing okay, Delphine," Shay said, laughing a little to inject lightness. "Really. I'm actually planning to hold you to very high standards for whatever you decide we're going to do this weekend."

Delphine regarded her wordlessly with that cool gaze of hers. At the conclusion of the study a little smile peeked out. "Okay. I will do my best to rise to the challenge."

"No pressure," Shay teased, letting the familiar rhythms relax her nerves.

Delphine raised her tumbler. "Here's hoping it will be my most stressful decision until then. Santé."

Delphine smiled when Shay touched her wine glass to the tumbler. They both took healthy sips and, as if to shake off the gravity the turn in their conversation had exerted, threw out suggestions of possible activities for a weekend venture.

Delphine criticized, chided, and chuckled on cue, but Shay found herself thinking that sometimes Delphine's smile didn't touch her eyes. Maybe it was her imagination, running overly sensitive. Or maybe Delphine was simply tired and taxed, as she could be in recent months. Maybe Delphine had other things on her mind.

Maybe. Hopefully.

Maybe Shay could have asked. But, for once, Shay didn't care much to know the answer.
"She's missing," Cosima announced when she bustled into the lab.

Without the benefit of forewarning or context, Delphine's mind leapt to the only mutual female acquaintance she and Cosima shared: Shay. Fear and confusion dumped ice into Delphine's veins until Cosima, unmindful of any reaction from her audience, continued: "She's still friends with me on Facebook but she hasn't updated in forever. So I started digging and asking around and apparently no one's seen her for weeks." Cosima paced and enumerated her subsequent points by ticking them off her fingers. "Not her band mates, not her friends, not her parents."

"Who?" Delphine asked with caution.

"My previous monitor," Cosima proclaimed, exasperated. "I kept thinking about her yesterday since you mentioned her and it turns out that this whole time she's been missing. How could I only be finding out about this now? What the hell?"

They stared at one another.

"I don't know," Delphine uttered when the silence grew unbearable.

"Did they do something to her?" Cosima demanded.

"I don't know," Delphine repeated, mind whirling.

"Let me rephrase the question," Cosima said slowly, voice straining. "Do you think they're capable of doing something to her—to eliminate loose ends?"

Delphine's lips parted. There was no crime or confirmation in admitting to a suspicion, but admitting it to Cosima would probably be as good as calling a supposition a fact. "I don't know."

Frenzy lurked in Cosima's eyes. "I need to talk to Leekie."

"I thought you were unhappy with your previous monitor," Delphine said, articulating the first thought that came to mind that didn't sound hysterical.

"I was angry at her," Cosima proclaimed. "It doesn't mean I wanted her dead!"

There it was. Fluttering in the open between them. A memory of Greg, skittish but eager, surfaced in Delphine's thoughts. But she'd thought of this possibility, hadn't she? That's why she'd brought up Greg's name to Aldous. She'd been probing for an indication, an answer. She'd wanted to see Aldous's reaction.

"You don't know that," Delphine said quietly.

"That's why I'm going to ask Leekie," Cosima said.

"What will that prove?" Delphine asked, tone sharp enough that she rushed to modulate it. "You think he'd admit to murder? He hid the synthetic sequence that contained the patent from you. What Aldous shares is selective—and that's when it doesn't involve a felony."
Cosima’s eyebrow quirked. "Felony, huh? Is all that law literature starting to rub off?" Her gaze constricted into shrewd. "What about you, Dr. Cormier? How do I know you're not covering up for DYAD's misdeeds?"

"You don't," Delphine said evenly, "but if I were trying to hide the murder of your previous monitor, why would I bring her up when she hadn't been in your thoughts for weeks?"

The muscles in Cosima's jaw contracted. "What's your point?"

"I have questions, too," Delphine said.

"So you're saying you don't know what goes on behind the scenes—well, behind the scenes of behind the scenes?"

Delphine breathed out heavily through her nose. "How much did your previous monitor know? Why do you assume I should know substantially more than she did just because my prior involvement compromised the double blind of other monitors? I was researching only a small part of the project before I was given greater responsibilities—and, really, my primary focus now is your physical health, not your social standing or habits. Toward that end I'm only told so much." Delphine shook her head. "It's possible you know more than I do."

Cosima crossed her arms, "Yeah, but how much do you actually want to know? How deep do you want to dig? Because I'm in this to hit bedrock."

Delphine took a deep breath. "If you discovered foul play was involved in the disappearance of your previous monitor, what would you do?" Cosima's lips formed a stern seal. "If I disappeared tomorrow, would you care?" Delphine pressed her fingertips to her mouth. "Or what about Shay? What if something happened to her?"

Cosima shook her head. "They wouldn't do anything to Shay. They have no reason to."

"Not yet," Delphine muttered.

"I'm not giving them a reason to," Cosima insisted. "Why are you so worried about Shay? Supposing that DYAD is offing wayward operatives, you're the one in a position to end up on the chopping block."

Delphine nodded with a distracted air. "Yes. But I made my decisions, knowing I would be given sensitive information—and I wanted to know it. Perhaps I didn't know how deeply the darker parts of the project ran, but I had an idea that not everything was sanctioned. The only thing Shay has done is be my friend." She met Cosima's gaze. "Look where that's already gotten her. Our secrets aren't like other people's secrets. That's what I was trying to say before." Delphine covered her mouth. "Your previous monitor—did she know about the clones? Did she know you were sick?"

Cosima hurled herself into the nearest lab station chair and slumped over her knees, forearms balanced on her thighs, fingers interlaced. "I don't know how much she put together. She knew something was up and that Leekie was involved. Maybe that was enough."

"We don't know that something horrible or intentional happened to her or that it involves DYAD," Delphine said.

Cosima turned to look toward the wall of windows. "Yeah, but what does it signify that you and I both leapt to the same heinous conclusion?" Cosima's head bobbed up and down in an agitated rhythm. "You're not exactly hiding the fact that you're operating under the assumption that something orchestrated by DYAD could happen to me or you or anyone close to us."
"Worst case scenario," Delphine affirmed softly. "Isn't that the principle that propels you and your sister? You don't trust DYAD. You might be working against their interests. Sarah has stirred up enough commotion that Rachel Duncan went over Aldous's head to retaliate at you."

"What's up with Rachel anyway?" Cosima asked, attention swinging back to Delphine.

"I don't know."

"You don't know a lot."

"I didn't know she existed until that day she came here to greet you," Delphine defended herself. "I haven't seen her since."

Cosima shook her head slowly and bowed her head. "It's like there's almost no point in trusting you because there's nothing to gain."

"What about trust for the sake of trust?" suggested Delphine.

Cosima loosed a bark of laughter.

"A little harmony wouldn't hurt," Delphine added.

Cosima's head whipped up. "Please tell me that's a page you took out of Shay's book."

"Shay does not have a monopoly on wanting peace and harmony in her life."

Cosima smirked. "Yeah, but before all this did you care all that much for peace and harmony? If it came down to peace in complacency or—" Cosima's hand twirled negligently through the air. "—tumult in ambition, which one would you have chosen?" Cosima twitched an eyebrow. "Which one would you choose now?"

Delphine didn't answer, but it wasn't lost on her that for the first time, maybe if only in the span of a moment, Cosima sounded almost like she was entertaining the idea that Delphine wasn't entirely her enemy.

The name surfaced in Delphine's thoughts later in the day, but the notion that her mind crafted around it, derived from her earlier discussion with Cosima, made her hesitate. Cosima wasn't altogether wrong in supposing that Delphine had little to offer her in terms of material insight. But it was more accurate to say that Delphine had little she wanted to share with Cosima—to save herself from possible resultant complications, one, and, two, to prevent fostering the expectation of voluntary disclosure in the future.

Cosima surmised a two-axis plot on which Delphine's actions competed on a scale of peace versus ambition, but she'd neglected to factor in a z-axis of pragmatism.


Courting Aldous's approval conferred a degree of protection—from him and the nebulous forces mustered behind him. Pursuing and earning Cosima's trust spoke louder to concerns of the conscience. Keeping to herself threatened isolation and heat from both sides with no recourse or argument to shield her from either's resentment and retribution. None of those courses factored in the law.
Every revelation forced a choice. Every opportunity to choose forced a reevaluation. Every reevaluation posed the same dilemma.

A year ago, the choice might not have been difficult.

Delphine imagined telling Shay the story of this moment. The tug at her heart surprised her.

"Cosima," Delphine said carefully and waited until she garnered Cosima's attention. "Do you know a Scott Smith?"

With the speed of a striking cobra, Cosima's mood went from indifferent to hostile. "How do you know that name?"

Delphine eased back in her seat, striving to embody unthreatened and nonthreatening. "It's the name of a job applicant. Aldous showed me his application. He seemed to be presenting Scott Smith as a strong candidate for the sequencing tech that you are looking for."

Stillness coiled in Cosima's muscles, a spring being compressed, until she shot out of her seat, whirling, spitting, "Shit. Shit shit shit."

"He was a colleague? From your program?" Delphine asked gently.

"He's an idiot, is what he is," Cosima said. She shook her head. "I need to—" Her attention snapped onto Delphine, as if remembering who Delphine was. "I need some privacy."

"You're going to try to convince him that coming to work for the DYAD is a bad idea?" Delphine asked.

"Because it is," Cosima said with heat.

A sensation close to pity pulled at Delphine's mouth. "You know what the DYAD looks like from the outside. I've told you about its appeal to the uninitiated. If you try to tell him not to work for a highly acclaimed multinational like the DYAD, he won't understand where you're coming from without being told the entire truth. Especially since as far as he understands, you are currently employed by the DYAD for the reasons he'd like to be."

Cosima ground her teeth, jaw flexing.

"He will make his decision independent of you, Cosima," Delphine said carefully.

"I have to approve any additions to this lab," Cosima pointed out.

"But that doesn't stop Aldous from hiring Scott in some other sector," Delphine pointed out. "Nor does it prevent Scott from inferring that you interfered if an offer is extended and subsequently rescinded."

Gaze flinty, Cosima said, "How long have you known about this?"

"Aldous brought it up earlier in the week."

Cosima's gaze narrowed, accentuated by the thickness of her eyeliner. "You didn't think to mention it?"

Delphine met her gaze squarely. "I prioritized the stem cell treatment. Then there was the issue of the patent. A lot came up."
"So you weren't withholding it from me?" Cosima pressed.

"I did," Delphine admitted bluntly, "so we could focus on other things."

Cosima flashed a bitter smile. "So bringing it up now is your strategic play for my good will?"

"I thought you should know," Delphine said.

Cosima's chin dimpled. She nodded curtly to herself. "I need the lab to myself."

The woman approached from behind, though Delphine was hardly paying attention enough that she had taken note of any passing figures.

"Dr. Delphine Cormier?"

Delphine raised her head to find a smartly coiffed and besuited woman beside her. She stood at a respectful distance, hands clasped loosely in front of her, her poise and the set of her shoulders settled into relaxed lines, the kind of self-possession that made Delphine sit up a little straighter. The kind that spoke to the casual assumption of control and authority.

"Yes?" asked Delphine with hesitation, twisting to face the stranger. "I'm sorry, have we met?"

The woman extended a hand. "Marion Bowles."

The name did not tickle any synapses. Even as Delphine put her hand into the proffered one out of reflex and muttered an automatic "Enchantée," the mild confusion must have bled into Delphine's features because the woman smiled. It wasn't a kind smile but it wasn't a cold smile, nor one that Delphine found reassuring. It was polite. Opaque. Relinquishing her grip, Ms.—Ms.? Mrs.? Dr.?—Bowles said, "You could say I'm on the Board, but it's more accurate to say I consult with the Board."

Delphine's hand sank onto her lap with preoccupied sluggishness.

"I'm not sure I understand how you know of me, then," Delphine said carefully. "I would not have thought someone like myself merited recognition from the Board, much less consultants to the Board."

"We take notice when one of our directors appears to take on a new protégée," Marion Bowles declared. Delphine's spine straightened. "It's also worth a closer look when she goes on assignment with Jennifer Fitzsimmons and then Cosima Niehaus."

Delphine gazed up at Ms. Bowles, perched still in the chair, unsure how to react when she had no inkling who this woman was besides well and deeply informed. When Delphine made no reply, Ms. Bowles smiled again. Still not warm, still not cold.

"This is not an interrogation or an audit, Dr. Cormier," Ms. Bowles said. "I saw you sitting here alone and . . . unoccupied. I thought I would take the opportunity to say hello."

But this introduction was something, if not an interrogation or an audit, if a woman possessed of Marion Bowles's claimed credentials would reveal her cards unprompted.

"May I help you?" Delphine asked.

"May I join you?"
Delphine involuntarily glanced about the open space. She was seated in the cafeteria located in the modern part of the DYAD premises, to which she'd retreated for a coffee. She'd briefly entertained the idea of the quieter, if colder, outdoor picnic area, where she'd once enjoyed cigarette breaks in accordance to Ontario's smoking laws, but her coat lay inaccessible in the lab and daring the Canadian winter's encroaching chill without it was inconceivable. The cafeteria, however, afforded no solitude. Distributed among tables of various proportions, personnel partook of meals and snacks and maintained a low buzz of murmurous conversation that permeated the atmosphere.

Delphine was acutely aware that the cafeteria was a very public place. It was a sense she'd developed more keenly in the early days of her growing intimacy with Aldous—whose eyes might be watching, who might be noting their joint appearances, who might be measuring their proximity. As a sense of a future in the DYAD took root in Delphine's outlook, prudence had propelled Delphine to mark who took interest, who might have felt they had an opportunity or a stake in gathering intelligence on the political landscape.

Delphine had no memory of ever beholding Marion Bowles's face, not even a passing familiarity with a face she might have encountered or glimpsed at a function, DYAD's or otherwise. If Marion Bowles was Someone, it was a someone Delphine didn't know and Delphine didn't know if the invisibility made Ms. Bowles more or less influential.

When Delphine hesitated to extend an invitation, Ms. Bowles added a pointed, "If you're not busy."

Delphine gestured to the nearest empty seat. "Please. I'm not busy."

Ms. Bowles lowered herself casually into the indicated chair with an ease that pressed her spine conforming to the curve of the backrest. Delphine resisted the schoolgirl instinct to sit up straight. Ms. Bowles studied Delphine, a cool assessment, but not clinical. Delphine could feel the gap that separated them, physical and hierarchical, but no hostility characterized the way Ms. Bowles surveyed her.

"You haven't been with the DYAD very long, have you, Dr. Cormier?" Ms. Bowles remarked. "Somewhere outside of a year? Two years at most?"

Delphine nodded. She saw no need to provide specifics—if Marion Bowles wanted exact periods, she could look up the information herself. Or so Delphine assumed.

"Do you enjoy working here?"

What was this, a job interview?

Delphine took careful measure of her words. "The opportunities I have here at the DYAD are innovative and exceptional."

Ms. Bowles smile curved with hints of humor. "One of a kind opportunities, wouldn't you say?" Ms. Bowles clasped her hands in her lap. "Would you say that about Cosima? You and she are of the same generation—do you find that your views correspond?"

"I'm not sure what you mean," Delphine said cautiously. "Cosima and I are peers, yes, but if anything, given the amount of doors and disciplines opening up to scientific inquiry, our generation, as you say, has more grounds on which to form disagreements."

"Really?" Ms. Bowles asked, eyebrows rising incrementally. "What are these grounds? Questions of which scientific inquiries to pursue? Disagreements regarding the allocation of resources and efforts? Methodological differences? Ethical?"
"I'm not sure I can say," Delphine hedged. "I can't claim to know Cosima well beyond the work we do together in the lab."

Ms. Bowles crossed one leg over the other at the knee and bounced her suspended foot once. "You aren't curious about her?"

"It is less a question of curiosity," Delphine clarified, "and more an issue of trust."

"Yes," Ms. Bowles breathed. "Trust. So you haven't won her trust."

"It is difficult to overcome a preexisting bias," Delphine defended herself.

"Has she won your trust?" Ms. Bowles inquired with the same casual air.

Delphine fended off a frown. "I'm sorry, but I don't know what you want from me. I am doing my best to address the current health concerns facing the project."

Puzzlement brushed Ms. Bowles's expression. "Surely Aldous has impressed upon you that the project is much more than just providing medical care. Do you care about her?"

"I'm sorry?" Delphine said, out of reflex.

"Do you care about Cosima?" Ms. Bowles reiterated. "About her welfare?"

"I want to see her get well," Delphine said. She added, because it was true, "I want the same for Jennifer, also."

Ms. Bowles nodded. "And the others?"

"The others? The other subjects? What about them?"

Ms. Bowles's gaze sharpened. "The other subjects in similar straits."

"Similar straits? You mean there are other cases? Aside from Katja Obinger?" Delphine slumped back into her chair. "I wasn't informed."

"I see that," Ms. Bowles said, eyes concentrated on Delphine.

"Does A—Dr. Leekie know?"

Ms. Bowles arched an eyebrow. "I know that you and Aldous are close."

"He has been a generous mentor to me," Delphine managed, noting that her question hadn't been answered, "though I would not go so far as to consider myself his protégée."

"Aldous isn't getting any younger," Ms. Bowles said easily, "and science hasn't yet stumbled upon a fountain of youth or the key to immortality and likely won't any time soon. He has his legacy to think of."

"Does he?" Delphine wondered. "He is not preparing me very well if those are his intentions. You see the depths of my ignorance."

Ms. Bowles displayed a cool smile, gently condescending. "You're very young yet. In fact, you haven't had much exposure to the industry as a whole. Knowledge is straightforward to impart, experience harder." Ms. Bowles tipped her head fractionally. "Where do you see yourself in five years?"
Delphine flashed a hesitant smile. "This is starting to sound more and more like a job interview."

"If it were," Ms. Bowles said, "what position would you like it to be for?"

Delphine's phone loosed a chime.

Ms. Bowles glanced at it first, prompting Delphine to follow suit. The temporarily lit screen gave Delphine enough time to catch Cosima's name.

"Do you want to check that?" Ms. Bowles asked.

Delphine reached for her phone and muttered, "Excuse me."

From Cosima [16:38]: You can come back.

"Something that requires attending?" Ms. Bowles asked. Delphine recognized it as a proposed, acceptable exit. Before Delphine could answer, Ms. Bowles rose smoothly to her feet. Delphine emulated her lead. "I'll let you get to that. But I hope that at some time in the future, you and I will have an opportunity for a much more in-depth conversation."

Delphine gazed into the face of the mysterious figure. "You know where to find me."

Ms. Bowles smiled. She looked satisfied. "I do."

Delphine hesitated. "And if I would like to contact you?"

The smile deepened. A business card was procured. "We might be able to arrange something."

As Delphine took the business card, she couldn't help but wonder who might be watching, who might be noting, who there among them recognized or knew this Marion Bowles.

"How do they do it?" Cosima asked.

"Who? Do what?" Delphine wondered. She'd found Cosima hunkered in the corner that constituted the chill zone, the moniker more apt as an indicator of the chilliness of the occupant's demeanor. It was the mood Delphine had more or less expected to be saturating Cosima's mien, knowing how she'd have scoffed at an attempt to derail her career, and had it not been for Marion Bowles and her inexplicable introduction, Delphine probably would have put off returning immediately to the lab. Circumspection had restricted Delphine from voicing any inquiries, leaving Cosima to wallow unaccosted and unaccomppanied in her space.

"How does DYAD turn people into their agents, into their monitors?" Cosima glanced at her. "Regular people."

Delphine shook her head. "I haven't been privy to the process."

Cosima shrugged. "Sometimes there's blackmail involved, I know that, but what about my ex? What was her deal? What did they tell her or offer her that made her think: 'Oh, yeah, that makes me totally cool with reporting on my girlfriend'? Did they get to her before or after we got together?"

Delphine was quiet. She'd expected to hear more anger in Cosima's words, but she sounded tired, maybe scared. She was no doubt thinking about Scott Smith.
"I don't know." Delphine moistened her lips. "Aldous doesn't answer such questions when I ask him. He prefers to turn the questions around on me. He says, 'How would you do it?'"

Cosima swiveled in her chair, reclined so that her back formed the hypotenuse of a triangle of empty space between her body and the cushions, her arms pulled tight around her body, hands clasping her triceps. With her brows forming a shelf of consternation above her eyes, her gaze landed on Delphine with begrudging interest. "How would you do it?"

Delphine checked a sigh. "The actual answers tend to be the most obvious solutions. Like the patent being encoded in your genes using binary."

"Occam's razor," Cosima chimed in with a nod. She twitched an eyebrow at Delphine expectantly.

"The implementation of the monitors also seems to be the simplest solution," Delphine said. "The system is extremely flexible and adaptable to your various situations and temperaments, but basic and uniform enough to provide comparable data. A plus is that the program is structured to allow the subject—you—to have the freedom of choice."

"The illusion of choice," Cosima said.

Delphine favored Cosima with a choice look.

"Alright," Cosima said, flipping up a hand in apology, "I'll stop interrupting."

"In at least one case, as far as I understand, prospects were placed in the path of a subject and she . . . allowed to choose."

"In other words, plants are one option. Like Paul."

It took a second for Delphine's mind to recognize that "plants" did not refer to foliage. "Yes? Though I'm not familiar with who Paul is."

Cosima shook her head. "Doesn't matter, you're still missing a key element: How do you get the plants to participate? Paul claims he was blackmailed, that DYAD has damaging dirt on him, so he did what they asked him to. Even if they didn't tell him why."

Delphine mulled on the scenario. "To be honest, blackmail seems like a precarious proposition. Depending on how it's employed." She met Cosima's watching eyes. "Let's take the case of Paul. I assume the blackmail material is unrelated to Project Leda?" Cosima nodded. "In which case, there's little to predict or indicate if he might find the work of being a monitor more objectionable or untenable than what is being held over his head. Then you have to rely on the double blind preventing him from . . . informing the subject of the nature of his monitor duties or defecting to some other outside outlet. Say, a rival company, or a government."

"Right," Cosima agreed. "Blackmail immediately compromises loyalty."

Delphine shrugged. "The most effective form of blackmail would probably be—well—a case like mine. Being a willing participant in itself becomes incriminating."

Cosima nodded slowly. "Akin to someone who was already positioned close to a subject being persuaded to spy on them. They agree and then the truth is so ugly that they end up needing to hide it, like, out of shame. Maybe."

Delphine nodded.
"But how do you convince someone to agree to spy on someone?" Cosima wondered. "Especially for reasons that aren't disclosed."

Delphine shook her head, at a loss. "A plausible cover story? Material rewards? Appeals to altruism? I assume you'd have to tailor each proposal to the individual case."

"So . . . everyone has a price," Cosima supplied.

Delphine appraised Cosima. "You don't think so?"

"It's more like that's what I'm worried about," Cosima muttered.

"You spoke with Scott Smith?" Delphine asked cautiously.

Cosima interlaced her fingers and pressed her palms to the top of her head. "'Talk' is a generous verb." She glanced at Delphine out of the corner of her eye. "Yeah, yeah, you told me so. He probably thinks the job sounds more lucrative and illustrious now."

"I could speak to Aldous," Delphine said, "but reluctance from me may instead act like a goad to him."

Cosima studied her. "He doesn't trust you?"

"He may no longer put much stock in my merit," Delphine acceded.

Cosima loosed an unexpected grin. "I can't believe we're having this conversation."

"It is . . . going fairly well," Delphine assessed.

"Given the sensitive nature of the topic," finished Cosima. She thrust her hands into the air, in what might have looked like a stretch if she had been stretching. "Whatever. Maybe you should go to him, spin him some tall tale about how I think Scott is a sleaze because he couldn't stop looking down my shirt."

"He did?"

"No," Cosima answered bluntly. "And now you can't tell Leekie that because you're a terrible liar."

"I am?"


"Do you need a ride?" Delphine offered, with less hesitation than she'd had in the past.

Cosima shook her head as she got to her feet. "No need to trouble yourself." She cocked her head. "Unless you're heading that way."

It was Friday, but Delphine hadn't settled any plans with Shay for the night. There was the matter of her unfinished homework assignment: Determine their weekend plans. Though it wasn't officially the weekend yet and other concerns had taken up residence in Delphine's mind. Marion Bowles. The other unknown subjects who were ill.

Avoiding Cosima's implied question, Delphine asked instead, "How do you get home when I don't drive you and if you're not using the company car service?"

"If I'm in the mood, public transportation—so next time I'm late, you know why. Or, you know, if
I'm feeling lazy, Uber," Cosima said. She grinned. "Like you said the other day, you can't stop technology."

From Cosima [5:05]: How do you feel about sushi?
To Cosima [5:05]: I sometimes worry if it's sustainable?
From Cosima [5:05]: I meant how do you feel about eating sushi?
To Cosima [5:06]: I eat it occasionally. I like it now and again.
From Cosima [5:06]: How do you feel about eating it now?
To Cosima [5:06]: Now?
From Cosima [5:07]: You mentioned there was Japanese nearby, didn't you?
To Cosima [5:07]: Yeah, a few places. Are u home?
From Cosima [5:07]: Yup. I can swing by.
To Cosima [5:07]: How about around 6? I'll be home around then.
From Cosima [5:08]: Sure. Let me know when you're ready and I'll come down. See you soon.

It felt early in the evening for Cosima to be home. If Shay judged by the hours Delphine kept. Shay couldn't recall ever seeing Delphine before six on a weekday and she couldn't think of a reason Cosima and Delphine wouldn't keep the same work hours. Maybe Delphine had let Cosima go early?

The notion—of Delphine exercising her authority in benevolent fashion—induced a smile initially, but then followed the realization that this was Delphine and Cosima. One of them going home early may have been an act of mercy or relief to one or both parties.

A flutter of apprehension accompanied Shay on the journey home.

But Cosima was all smiles when Shay met her in the hall downstairs.

Shay said, "So I know of like one or two places that serve sushi that take about a ten-, fifteen-minute walk." She glanced down at Cosima's footwear, which were not exactly walking shoes. "The temperature is dropping a bit, though. I don't know if you want to muster through that. We can take my car."

"I'm down for walking," Cosima said. "I can get a look around the neighborhood."

The falling temperature prevented the walk from being comfortable, but the lack of a breeze at least mitigated the addition of a chill factor. There was a liveliness in the air as they wended around other pedestrians and parties eager to start the weekend and take advantage of happy hours. Cosima kept up a running commentary on the sights and stores and Shay answered her questions and provided commentary where she could. Still, when they tumbled into the restaurant Shay's ears stung in the heat and the tip of Cosima's nose sported a touch of pink.

"What do you recommend here?" Cosima asked when they were confronted with the menu and were finished with the business of shedding outer layers.

"I have no idea," confessed Shay, picking up the menu. "I've never been here."

Cosima looked startled, then she grinned. "Alright. I'm down. Sake?"

"It's strong," Shay remarked.

"You're not driving," Cosima reminded her.
"Okay, but only if we split drinking it evenly."

"Why does that sound like it's coming from some bad past experience?" Cosima asked.

"Because it is," Shay confirmed. "I feel the need to make it clear now that I'm not going to let you get away with making me finish everything."

"Why would you say that?"

"Just a vibe I get from you," Shay said.

Cosima quirked an eyebrow. "What kind of vibe?"

"You remind me of my brother. He orders too much and then he behaves like it's an act of generosity when he makes me finish all the dishes."

"He's older?" Cosima asked. Shay nodded. "Then maybe he does feel like he's doing his duty as your big brother by feeding you. Maybe he worries you don't get enough to eat."

"He could be a good big brother by listening to me when I say I don't need to eat more and not guilt-tripping me into finishing meals."

Cosima grinned. "The way you talk about it makes me wish I had an older brother. It'd be great to have one around when I get the munchies."

"That's not quite how big brothers work," chided Shay.

"No?" Cosima asked, cheeky. "Then I guess I didn't miss out on much." She shed the sarcasm. "Did Delphine get this warning?"

"No."

"No?"

"Delphine has a European sensibility regarding food proportions. It's never been an issue. Aside from the wine."

"As opposed to my presumably oversized American sense of proportion?" Cosima teased.

Shay smiled to herself. "As opposed to the mischief I'm seeing in your eyes right now."

Cosima laughed. "I didn't have any designs before you said something. If there's mischief there, you put it there."

Shay jerked her head to the side. "But it's still up to you to act on it."

"That's how you're going to shift blame?" Cosima scoffed. Shay abstained from responding, keeping her eyes fixed on the menu. She could hear a smile in Cosima's voice. "Alright. I see how it is. Noted. Do you have any sake preferences?"

"I'm not really versed in sake," Shay admitted.

Cosima ran her finger down the list of sake options. "Do you want sweet or more of a kick in the throat?"

Shay winced at the latter description. "Let's go with sweet."
"Nigori, then," Cosima said. "Flavored sakes can be a gamble: you never know if it's going to taste like medicinal syrup. Oh, wait, they've got a special tonight. We can have a whole 'sake flight'—three different types."

Shay smiled. "You've had a lot of sake?"

"Enough to be able to tell them apart."

"Noted," Shay said. Cosima glanced up and caught Shay's smug expression. Cosima flashed a smile. Shay browsed the menu. "What are you considering? California rolls?"

"Ha ha," Cosima drawled. "It's not even on the menu. Are California rolls a thing you'd see on a menu up here?"

"There's another restaurant down the street that has it. I didn't know this one wouldn't."

"So you've been to the other sushi place but not to this one," Cosima observed. "Why did you pick this one, then? I have to say that this is a fancier restaurant than I was expecting."

"I haven't had an excuse to come here," Shay said. "Like you said, it's fancier, and I always figured I'd want to come with someone rather than by myself. That and I remember you talking about fish quality one time. I'm hoping that the prices here reflect high inspection standards."

"You didn't think to bring Delphine?" Cosima wondered.

"The opportunity didn't come up. There was always somewhere else to go."

"Not because sushi isn't her thing?" Cosima wondered.

"I couldn't tell you one way or another," Shay said. That she and Delphine didn't eat sushi was more a reflection of Shay's preferences. Sushi wasn't Shay's first choice for mode of fish consumption, partly because the aforementioned quality and that prices varied so radically one restaurant to the next, so the option was rarely at the forefront of Shay's mind whenever meal deliberations came up.

"In terms of sustainability," Cosima said in a casual tone, "I'm not sure this was the best bet."

"Yeah, I just noticed they don't use any farmed fish," Shay agreed. "Though that doesn't necessarily mean they're irresponsible."

Silence from Cosima met that supposition, but to her surprise Shay saw a measure of pause in Cosima's features, as if she were assessing the validity of the remark. The topic slid from further examination when Cosima asked, "Are we allowed to do the omakase without a reservation, do you think?"

Shay raised an eyebrow.

"It would save us the trouble of having to choose," Cosima pointed out. "That or we can play a game of 'who can choose the better tapas' and loser has to foot the bill."

"That sounds like a very dangerous game," Shay said. "The problem I have with that is that I don't know you well enough to know in which direction that would be dangerous."

"What do you mean?"

"I don't know if you're the type of person who engages in genuine competition," Shay informed the menu, "or the type of person who goes for subterfuge and self-sabotage to wind up paying the bill."
"Dude, what even are your past experiences?" Cosima laughed. "Which one are you?"

"Depends on the situation."

"So if you were on a date," Cosima said in a leading manner.

"Depends on the woman," Shay finished, smiling.

"Alright, I acknowledge your non-answers," Cosima conceded. "How do you meet women in Toronto?"

"Me or in general?"

"Both."

"Toronto's a gay friendly place," Shay said. "There are bars and clubs. Not really my thing, though. I use a dating app sometimes."

"Which one?"

"Sapphire."

"Any good?"

"Still single," Shay announced lightly. Cosima grinned. "Which isn't a measure of whether or not the app is good, but I've yet to have real success."

Cosima nodded. "Maybe I'll look into it. I've never used a dating app before, though."

"It can be . . . an experience," Shay said diplomatically.

"You're really giving it a ringing endorsement," Cosima said dryly.

"Well," Shay said cautiously, "I think it's more like Tinder than anything else and I think that approach has a hard time taking off in our community."

"You mean it's like a hookup scene?"

"Well, you know, more appearance-based, swipe left, swipe right."

"Right, so . . . sort of superficial, maybe facilitating a more casual scene. Is that what you're looking for?" Cosima asked.

"No."

"So you're using the app least suited to your purpose?" Cosima teased.

"Maybe," Shay said. "Sometimes I don't even know what I want on any given day."

Cosima grinned. "Anyway, how are we going to do this?"

"I would like to choose dishes," Shay said.

"Being decisive, I like it," Cosima said.

"But I don't want to turn dinner into a competition."
"Deal," Cosima said.

Around the time the fourth dish made it to their table—chicken wings that piqued Cosima's curiosity and from which Shay abstained, though Cosima expounded on the simple delectable genius of salt and pepper Asian-style chicken wings—Shay received a message.

From Delphine [6:50]: I've decided what we will do. I will pick you up tomorrow? We could do lunch first or go early and then do lunch afterward.

Shay read the message, then reread it and stared at it for good measure, struck with a second's self-doubt that maybe the sake was affecting her reading comprehension. The message was puzzling enough that it merited immediate reply. "Sorry, excuse me," Shay told Cosima as she typed.

To Delphine [6:51]: U didnt say what we're doing.
From Delphine [6:51]: It's a surprise.
From Delphine [6:51]: But you can decide if we do lunch first or after.

Shay frowned at the screen.

To Delphine [6:52]: Which do u think is better?
From Delphine [6:52]: If we do lunch first, it will be an early lunch. If we do lunch after, it will be a late lunch.
To Delphine [6:52]: That does not answer my question.
From Delphine [6:53]: I don't think one is better or worse.

With a shake of her head, Shay put her phone aside.

Cosima, scanning her expression, asked, "Delphine?"

Shay's eyebrows flicked up. "How'd you guess?"

Cosima paused—maybe due to a sluggishness wrought by the sake, which they were consuming at a pace of a one-for-one exchange that Cosima said would guarantee they consumed equal amounts; what Shay knew for sure was that her alcohol tolerance was not what it used to be judging by the heat pooling in her ears—but then said, "It's the only name I have to throw out there." Shay smiled, conceding the truth. Cosima picked up a chicken wing. "Was she trying to nab you to get dinner?"

"No," Shay said.

"So I'm not keeping you from her right now?" Cosima asked.

"No. Why? Would you want to?" Shay asked recklessly and that was definitely the sake speaking and it was definitely mortification that made Shay freeze once her mind caught up with her mouth.

But Cosima looked thoughtful. "If that was my goal, the way to derive the most enjoyment from that would be to make sure that Delphine knows I'm here with you. But she doesn't know and I don't really care if she knows or not. That wasn't my intention tonight."

"What was your intention?" Shay asked, giving the sake rein of her tongue since it didn't seem to be doing harm.

"Spend the night in good company."
Shay smiled crookedly. "I appreciate that you qualified that with 'good.'"

"Having good company facilitates being good company," Cosima posited.

"Were you at risk of being bad company?" teased Shay.

"To myself, maybe," Cosima said, without humor or bluster.

"Yeah?" Shay asked softly, sobered by Cosima's tone. "Why do you say that?"

Cosima shrugged. "Sometimes if I'm left to my own devices too long, I start to think too much."

"Start to think too much?" Shay wondered. "I assumed thinking was the default state of being for people like you and Delphine. Is there actually a threshold where it becomes too much?"

"Maybe not so much a threshold but there are certain thoughts it's better not to hole up with alone."

"Like what?" Shay asked gently.

Cosima shook her head, greasy fingers curled loosely to avoid smearing anything. "Like . . . is this all there is?"

"Is what all there is to what?" Shay asked, lost.

"Is this all there is to life?" Cosima asked plainly.

"Oh," uttered Shay, trying to shift her thoughts onto more solid ground with the philosophical pivot. "Yeah. That's—that's heavy thinking material."

Cosima fixed Shay with a look that was far too keen and sober. "Do you think there's more than just this: being born, waking, eating, sleeping, converting energy, cellular mitosis, aging, dying?"

Shay plucked an edamame from the half-depleted dish to have something to do with her hands and help her mind focus on the suddenly critical task of articulation. "A lot of stuff happens on top of all that—and in between, too. Philosophers would say that's the stuff of life."

"Sure. But I'm talking about the finish line," Cosima said. "When you get there is it like hitting a wall or is there more—something after?"

"Are you asking for a definitive answer?" Shay wondered.

Cosima smiled. "I'm curious about your opinion."

"What's yours?" Shay parried.

Cosima lifted an eyebrow.

"Since you're asking," Shay amended.

Cosima's mouth pulled to the side. "I didn't expect you to be shy about this."

"Not shy," Shay said, "wary. I don't enjoy being backed into a corner."

Cosima's head cocked at an angle. "Science and metaphysics don't have to be mutually exclusive."

Shay shrugged.
Cosima nodded slowly. "Should I thank Dr. Cormier for your skittishness?"

Shay nibbled a bean out of its shell. Cosima leaned forward.

"Scientific methods have been applied to test all sorts of metaphysical realities," Cosima said. "Attempts have been made to measure the weight of the soul. We try all sorts of ways to detect spirits and ghosts. Individuals and civilizations devoted a lot of time and energy and observation toward trying to predict when the world would end using disciplines like math and astrology."

Shay smiled to cover a laugh. "You sound like Delphine. You're just missing the punchline."

"Punchline?"

"That the science has come up with nothing."

Cosima smiled. "Depends who you ask. The human brain is . . . weird. Mysterious. We don't fully understand all its processes. You know it will fill in details if it can't process everything? It's why optical illusions work. Human brains have trouble processing certain types of inputs, so to provide an impression that fits our cognitive capabilities, the brain makes assumptions based on evolutionary lessons and principles we mostly only guess at. Science can be like poking around in the dark hoping to get results that provide pictures we can make sense of. We've gotten a lot better at it but there are still so many things we don't understand. Maybe there are some things we're not ready to understand."

Shay leaned back in her chair. "I asked Delphine once if she found all those unanswered questions overwhelming. Do you?"

Cosima wiped her fingers on her napkin, eyes lowered to the task. "Only a handful of certain, very specific questions."

"Like if there's more to life than a physical existence?"

"That's actually not one of them," Cosima said softly, a little wonderingly. "It's not at the top of the list, anyway. Yet. I mean, one way or another we're all going to get the answer to that question."

Cosima fingered her small sake cup. "Sooner or later."

"What do you want the answer to be?" Shay asked.

"I don't know," Cosima said. She sipped from the cup, replaced it on the table carefully, then peered at Shay through the top of her lenses. "It might depend on whether or not I feel satisfied with the time I've had when the end comes."

Shay nodded. "That seems like a rational response."

"What about you?" Cosima asked.

For someone who hadn't divulged much substance, Cosima seemed to expect it in return. Shay finished her edamame and shrugged. "At some point I stopped believing in a heaven or a hell. I don't think Osiris is going to measure my heart or that a valkyrie is going to sweep me off my feet—though in that case I don't know if I'd complain."

"Reincarnation has its appealing points—that you get another chance, that you and the people important to you will meet again—but I think, at the very least, for me, I want to believe that we're capable of putting good energy out into the world regardless of all that. Not necessarily karma, that you're paying something off or paying something forward, but I like the sense of everything being
"connected." Shay ran her finger along the edge of her plate. "It makes me feel like there's a stake in trying to be a decent person." Shay shook her head. "Otherwise, what's the point?"


Shay giggled, partly to vent the nervous titter in her stomach. "Right? My mom made me read . . . everything—and most of it was about the 'human condition.' But that just means we've been asking the same questions for forever, whatever we're prone to believing in any given era."

"People with too much time to think," Cosima said lightly. "They should have spent more time enjoying meals with good company."

Shay chuckled. "But if there hadn't been people who did all the overthinking already, what would my mom have given me to read growing up? And . . ." Shay said, downing the liquid in her cup of sake, "how would I have learned to recognize all the tropes of the human condition so that I could ignore them?"

Cosima refilled her cup. "Is that what you do?"

"No," Shay said, riding on the buzz in her blood, "but I try."

When the tops of buildings weren't obscuring it, there was a half moon in the sky throwing light onto their path during the walk back. Cosima occasionally glanced up at its pale, semi-obscured features.

"Thanks for getting dinner with me tonight," Cosima said.

"I got to try a restaurant I've been curious about, so it was an opportunity for me," Shay said.

"Are you suggesting you took advantage of me instead of the other way around?" Cosima said, smile mischievous in the moonlight.

"How is that you manage to make innocent things sound more suggestive than they were intended?" sniped Shay.

"If it sounds that way, I'm going to say that's all on you," Cosima declared.

Shay gave Cosima a light shove. Cosima stumbled a few steps, laughing.

"For the record," Cosima added, "you were at the top of my list for good company. Not just because you were the closest."

"Was it a very long list?" Shay asked, teasing.

"Hey, I know some people in Toronto," Cosima objected to Shay's implications. "Admittedly . . . how would you categorize people you care about, but there's a feeling that you don't know them very well, or they don't know you well, or you're not even sure you get along?"

Shay frowned. Her muddled thoughts threw out a suggestion: "Family?"

For a second, Cosima's expression slackened with befuddlement. Then she laughed, nearly into a coughing fit. Shay looked on, slightly puzzled.

"Exactly," Cosima said when she recovered. "They're like family."
Cosima dropped Shay off at her door. There might have been a moment, a pause, where Shay thought Cosima looked undecided, but Cosima waved and went on her way. Something about watching Cosima peel off toward the stairs and her separate quarters felt reminiscent of bidding good night to other recruits before lights out. It was a disorienting notion; Shay tended not to think about those days.

Inside her warm studio, Shay shed all her outer layers and retrieved her phone from the bottom of her bag. Delphine's last message had accrued no additional commentary since Shay had abandoned their exchange. Shay flopped into the single seater, hanging her legs over the arm.

To Delphine [8:03]: How about u cone over tomorrow morning, we have brunch at my place, and then we can go on adventures?
From Delphine [8:05]: What time should I come over?
To Delphine [8:05]: 9? 10?
From Delphine [8:05]: 9:30?

Shay smiled.

To Delphine [8:06]: That'll work.
From Delphine [8:06]: OK. I will come over at 9:30.

Shay melted into the seat. She should drink a glass of water. Or two. The languor was departing or settling in, the sake working its way out of her bloodstream, but her digestive system gearing up to conduct serious work. If she didn't move, sleepiness would keep her anchored lazily in the spot.

To Delphine [8:07]: How was it day?
From Delphine [8:07]: Interesting.
To Delphine [8:08]: Interesting like cool top secret stuff happened born interesting like someone sent u a funny work email?
Shay blinked at her screen.

To Delphine [8:08]: or*
To Delphine [8:08]: Sorry. I may have had too much to drive.
To Delphine [8:08]: drink*

Shay powered down the phone, got to her feet, and slipped the device into her back pocket, even as it loosed a series of alerts. She made her way to the kitchen and retrieved a glass of water that she downed in one go. She refilled the glass and leaned against the island.

From Delphine [8:09]: Interesting in that it seems like more people know of me than I was aware.
From Delphine [8:09]: Make sure to drink water.
From Delphine [8:09]: And perhaps eat something if you haven't.
To Delphine [8:11]: Being known sounds like a good thing?
From Delphine [8:11]: Have to wait and see. How are you feeling?
To Delphine [8:12]: I'm fine. at home.
From Delphine [8:12]: How was your day?
To Delphine [8:12]: OK.

Shay smiled to herself.

To Delphine [8:12]: Now I'm feeling lazy.
From Delphine [8:13]: What does a lazy Shay do?
To Delphine [8:13]: Read. Browse the Internet. Sleep.
To Delphine [8:13]: What does a lazy Delphie so?
From Delphine [8:14]: The same. I used to smoke as well.

Shay grimaced.
From Delphine [8:14]: You probably made a face when you read that.
To Delphine [8:14]: Maybe.
From Delphine [8:14]: It's okay. It was better I quit sooner rather than later.
To Delphine [8:15]: There was a lot of smoking in the military. That's mostly what it reminds me of.
To Delphine [8:15]: Bored soldiers killing time.
To Delphine [8:15]: That probably wasn't u.
From Delphine [8:16]: Yes. I was never a soldier, just a medical student.

Shay shook her head.
To Delphine [8:16]: I meant bored.
From Delphine [8:16]: I was bored. Sometimes.

Shay's mind supplied the words in Delphine's voice, but it couldn't decide on the tone: dry sarcasm or sly revelation?
To Delphine [8:16]: So being a med student wasn't like Greys Anatomy?
From Delphine [8:17]: I don't know what that means.
To Delphine [8:17]: It's a show. U can watch it in Netflix.
From Delphine [8:17]: Maybe something I might watch if someone watched with me.

The suggestion plucked a chord the alcohol had unearthed and left open to exposure. Shay envisioned Cosima at the door, that moment Shay thought might have been hesitation, and balked at her own impulse to tell Delphine to come over, to be close, to fill the studio with her presence—

To ward off the livewire surge of loneliness.

Shay scoffed at herself. At the way she strategically neglected to mention Cosima or that night's dinner. At the way she wanted to carry on this inconsequential thread of communication with Delphine if it meant maintaining a flimsy connection, grasping at a sense of immediacy and intimacy through a piece of inanimate, remote hardware as if it could substitute for the contact she'd failed to find for so long.

A weight dragged at Shay's heart, a tug at the bottom of her brain that threatened to bring it plunging and sinking, a sensation familiar and dismaying.

She couldn't dwell on this. She knew what lay down that trajectory.

To Delphine [8:18]: I'll see u tomorrow.
From Delphine [8:18]: 9:30.
To Delphine [8:18]: Yes. Good night.
From Delphine [8:18]: Bonsoir.

The messenger closed with a tap. Simple and instantaneous. If only her mind were capable of the same and Shay could have put a stop to all the mental processes that kept her cognizant and plagued by the awareness that Delphine lurked just a tap on a touchscreen away.
This monster-length chapter made me question my sanity and how I'd gotten to this point writing this fanfic that started off as a silly notion. I don't think I actually have an answer. But here we are. XD

But, guys, friends, can I share with you an amazing thing? Over on tumblr, hellwizards made fanart of Shay and Delphine on the "Couch of Danger" exist and I could not be more astounded and overwhelmed.

We'll always at least have this. :D
Delphine arrived early, as per her wont. Shay, whose wont was to wake up early but not necessarily be ready early, met Delphine waiting at her door as she hurried back from a morning grocery run. They greeted each other in hushed tones, like they might disturb neighbors sleeping in on a Saturday, and there was a softness to Delphine's small smile that Shay's mind couldn't help but note. Delphine offered to hold the bag as Shay wrangled with keys, but Shay waved her away.

Breakfast was not a fancy affair. It wasn't a meal Shay skipped, but it was one she kept light. She sliced fruit, offered granola and yogurt, and put out a plate of impulse-buy biscotti. Despite the effort, those items sat mostly neglected beside the prized caffeinated beverages. Watching Delphine cradle a mug of coffee—slow-drip to accommodate the miser's worth of beans Shay had bought, creamer as substitute for the lack of condensed milk—effortlessly constructed the image of Delphine with a cigarette dangling between her fingers, a projection that felt so stereotypically French and femme fatale that Shay had to smother a giggle.

Delphine shot her an inquisitive look.

Shay shook her head and fought off the smile. "Do I get a clue what's in store for today?"

Delphine's satisfaction manifested in a self-contained smile. "It is something probably overdue."

"Is there going to be actual activity involved?" Shay pressed, dissatisfied by the evasion.

"Perhaps," Delphine said brightly.

"Should I bring snacks?" Shay asked.

The suggestion brought out an amused smile. "Do you have snacks to bring?"

Wordlessly Shay made her way to a drawer and extracted a handful of fruit bars that she put aside on the island to stow in her bag. Delphine's smile stretched wide.

"Am I dressed appropriately?" Shay asked, archly, to deflect Delphine's bemusement and air her growing sense of exasperation.

"Yes," Delphine assured her with a quick glance's assessment of her casual ensemble. "Wear comfortable shoes."

"We're going to do a lot of . . . walking?" Shay hazarded.

"Perhaps," Delphine offered—in a contemplative manner that didn't feel like an outright lie or an evasion but possibly reflected genuine uncertainty.

Shay rolled her eyes because it still didn't answer her question, but she checked the concern to ask if Delphine could endure an overdrawn ordeal on her feet and made sure to put on her comfortable, padded boots. Her hats hung in waiting appeal.

"Are we going to be outside much?" Shay queried.

Delphine shook her head. "I don't expect so."
That final rebuttal resigned Shay to complete blind submission to Delphine's intentions. With fruit bars in her purse, comfortable shoes on her feet, and no hat upon her head, Shay followed Delphine to the doctor's car, where the built-in navigation announced they were about thirty minutes from their destination. The announcement prompted a glance in her direction from Delphine, but Shay indulged Delphine's play at secrecy by pointedly ignoring the screen.

Delphine smiled and, as she did sometimes when she was in the driver's seat, switched the radio station from talk radio to an oldies music channel, the volume turned low. Shay hummed along to snatches of familiar songs. The ride in Delphine's car was liquid smoothness, the suspension providing a sensation of gliding, nothing like how the VW Bug transmitted every rut and bump up through the carriage. The sun filtered warmly through the windows and heat wafted from the vents against the encroachment of the outdoor chill so that a sleepy stupor seeped into Shay in that snug floating bubble.

"Are you feeling okay?" Delphine asked softly a few minutes into the drive.

Shay glanced over. "Is there a reason I wouldn't be?"

Delphine smiled to herself. "I wasn't sure how much you drank. Though I suspected perhaps not so much because your typing wasn't that affected."

Shay smirked. "That was the surefire indicator?"

"It's not a bad barometer," asserted Delphine.

"Maybe autocorrect was really good," Shay countered.

"Was it?" Delphine asked.

Shay smiled. "It worked really hard last night. It always does."

Delphine smiled, but the effort faltered at the corners. "You didn't have a bad day yesterday?"

Shay's mind required an extra second to track Delphine's logic, but she got there. "No, yesterday was fine. Cosima and I got dinner and there was sake involved."

"Sake?" Delphine repeated. "You went to eat Japanese?"

"Cosima wanted sushi."

Delphine nodded.

Shay felt she should say something else, that Delphine's advice to be careful still lingered at the back of her mind, that it would have been nice if Delphine could have joined them, that Cosima seemed troubled, that she wondered why Cosima had gone home early but Delphine evidently hadn't, that Shay wished she and Delphine could have discussed Cosima and related topics, that she was unsure if mentioning she spent time with Cosima made Delphine uncomfortable, that she felt uncomfortable at the thought that Delphine might feel uncomfortable.

But the window of opportunity closed. Music filled the trough of their silence and obscured the seabed of unspoken thoughts. The remainder of the drive unfolded peaceful and smooth with no more mentions of sushi, sake, or the dreadlocked scientist who'd ordered them.
Shay stared through the passenger window as Delphine got out of the car. Soon after the driver's side door closed with a percussive thud that propelled Shay to yank on the door handle around which her fingers loosely curled, but upon exiting Shay stood rooted beside the vehicle, gaze transfixed.

Circling around the car to join her, Delphine smiled at her. From cars in the stalls around them disembarked fellow visitors, groups mostly composed of a mix of adults and children, some of whom dashed recklessly ahead as their larger counterparts called sternly and fruitlessly after them.

"I feel like," Shay began slowly, "I'm back in elementary school and this is a field trip and you're the class chaperone."

"Is it okay?" Delphine asked, an edge of apprehension in her voice.

Before them sprawled the Ontario Science Centre.

Shay suffered an irrepressible giggle. She hadn't speculated on what the weekend might entail, but she knew she wouldn't have guessed this. "Yes. I've never been here before, so it's definitely going to be an adventure. I feel like I need to hold your hand to be kept from wandering off."

There was no hesitation. With an emerging smile Delphine held out her hand. Shay regarded the extended offer. A chuckle escaped on an exhalation and, without further ado, Shay stepped close and slipped her hand into Delphine's.

* *

The ticket counter effected a separation—and a brief disagreement about ticket purchases that Delphine was allowed to win—but Shay had gained insights during the journey across the parking lot. Delphine displayed no compunctions or self-consciousness about holding Shay's hand in broad daylight and plain view. (In a loose, casual grip, her fingers initially cold to the touch.) They'd attracted some discreet attention, both cursory and pointed, in one case a furtive study from a young teenager with a mixed-age group that was likely her family. Shay had smiled at her. The girl had looked away quickly.

If Delphine noticed any of this, she'd shown no indication, not subject to the hypersensitivity that seized Shay, not plagued by the sense of self-incrimination that harkened from insecurities past or the sense of self-incrimination stemming from a conflicted present. Delphine kept a sedate pace beside Shay, neither leading nor trailing, eager, but in a mild manner.

Though Shay had cast her as chaperone, Delphine's eyes lit up as they wandered into the museum. It wasn't a child's giddy excitement, displayed by the numerous tykes rushing to occupy interactive exhibits, but a radiation akin to pride. This was what she endeavored to show Shay: the accomplishments of humanity's curiosity, ingenuity, deduction, and craft—the legacy Delphine sought to carry on and contribute to.

They paid respects to the human body first, familiar ground to both of them, if in slightly different capacities. Delphine proved the type to read all displayed text—in English or French, whichever proved less crowded and accessible (and not because of preference)—and provided summaries and highlights to save Shay the trouble of having to do the same, her tone while imparting this knowledge part reflective, part evaluative, part professorial.

It was easy to see the academic in Delphine and this softer side of it, rather than as her opponent or inquisitor, roused the fondness exposure had fostered through small windows like this one of a woman Shay had first understood as remote and intimidatingly beautiful. It was the cumulative effect of a series of slow, gradual revelations, from those first conventional discussions of a week's physical
trials and pains, to the hesitant references to her work, to the longer dinner and happy hour discussions.

To today.

At an interactive station called the Aging Machine, Shay dithered in front of the camera. She turned to Delphine with a suggestive smile.

"Fine," Delphine said without being asked and positioned herself in front of the camera.

"I wouldn't want to risk it stealing my soul," Shay said airily.

Delphine rolled her eyes. "I have never suggested you believe anything such as that."

Shay gave her a sly look that suggested otherwise. Delphine ignored her and gave the eye of the camera a close-lipped smile.

"Of course you'd age well," Shay remarked at the resulting manipulated projection.

"You say that like you wish that I won't," Delphine chided. She regarded the prospect of her lined, sunken features. "This does suppose that I don't gain twenty kilos in the interim."

Shay grinned. "Are you planning to gain weight?"

"You never know," Delphine muttered. "Anything can happen."

What didn't happen was the dance floor filled with jumping, squealing children producing energy to make the panels light up.

"I cannot compete with that," Delphine said.

"What about a different type of dance floor?" Shay wondered.

"You mean like a discotheque?" Delphine's head canted. "It's been a long time." She cast a sideways look at Shay. "You?"

Shay laughed and didn't answer the question. Delphine's eyebrows rose in silent comment, but she didn't press. Since they were passing by and it was unoccupied, Shay diverted attention to the ultrasound simulator. She nudged the transducer about. "You know, if the goal of having a fun weekend outing is to keep out thoughts of work, I feel like we're not avoiding your line of work very well."

"Being with you is avoiding work," Delphine said without hesitation. "But I wouldn't consider exploring science to be work, either." She smiled down at Shay's aimless handiwork with the transducer. "Do you think I perform ultrasounds all day?"

"No, but I get the feeling it's part of your job somewhere."

Delphine chuckled lowly. "Good instincts."

* * *

It wasn't difficult to get Delphine to play. That was the outing's most delightful discovery. When Shay leaned over during the static electricity demonstration and whispered, "I dare you to volunteer," Delphine gave her a glancing smirk, as if to scoff at the low bar of her challenge, and raised her hand high. (She was passed over in favor of a little girl and her father, the little girl's abundance of fine,
medium-length hair perfect to make stand on end.) In the science arcade they saw children struggling
with a massive pendulum and Delphine teased that it probably weighed as much as Shay—"Not too
heavy." "As if you're one to talk!"—but then, holding Shay's hand for balance, Delphine clambered
sacrifically onto the oversized lever to offer Shay an opportunity to determine her weight—as long
as Shay could finagle through the math of the accompanying formula.

"I'm not going to stand here all day," Delphine declared.

"It's good for your core strength," Shay pointed out idly.

"Are you a fitness trainer now, as well?" Delphine wondered.

"No, but I've been through boot camp."

That made Delphine reconsider Shay from the vantage of higher ground.

"What?" Shay prompted.

"Did you lose weight after the military?" Delphine wondered, tone caught between frank curiosity
and solicitous caution.

"Yeah," Shay answered with straightforward honesty. "Muscle mass, mostly. I don't lift much and
I'm over straining through endless crunches and push ups."

"That is not difficult to understand."

Bearing her diminished load of muscle mass, she and Delphine strained against the matching poles of
a magnet together for no other reason than that they could—and laughed at themselves among the
confusion of passersby. At the sound waves station, Shay sang a few strains of "A Hard Day's
Night," which had played on the radio on the way over, and sent the wires in the display trembling.
When she trailed off, Delphine surprised her by launching into a slow tempo French song. They
exchanged smiles. It was easy to forget Delphine's foreigner status, in large part due to her fluency in
English, which obscured her momentary stumbles or even the moments she requested clarifications
on their cultural differences. Because, although she was undeniably French, Delphine never brought
attention to her own cultural specificities, Shay realized. If Shay had talked about being from the
prairies, Delphine had presented herself as a city girl, as if there were a universal urban experience.

Clever.

Unsurprisingly.

Also unsurprising (if only to Shay): When Shay sat down to test her reaction time in a driving
simulator—accelerate without reserve, brake on cue—her result earned a dubious look from
Delphine. Shay promptly vacated the seat and presented it to Delphine in open challenge. Delphine
readily obliged.

Shay's time turned out better.

(They chose, out of unspoken mutual respect and utmost chivalry, not to draw attention to the fact,
but the look in Delphine's eyes confirmed every suspicion Shay had of Delphine's competitiveness.
A second's hesitation preceded Delphine surrendering the seat that belied a probable desire for a
second round.)

"Perhaps I should have eaten more this morning," Delphine idly remarked as they walked away.
Smothering a smile, Shay retrieved a fruit bar from the depths of her bag and offered it to Delphine.

Delphine eyed the olive branch. "Want to split it?"

They split it. Victory spread sweetly upon Shay's tongue.

Delphine slipped the wrapper into her pocket, though she swept the area surreptitiously for a wastebin. With her preoccupied, it was Shay that steered them toward the electronic keyboard upon which two small children gleefully banged out notes and discordant chords. As she and Delphine neared, their guardians ushered them off and onward. Shay detoured toward the opportunity and, considering the black and white array, played a few scales across the keys.

Delphine raised an eyebrow. "You play?"

"My brothers and I all got lessons," Shay said, tapping out a right-hand rendition of "Twinkle, Twinkle." "My mom played, so we had a small upright piano at home to practice on, but she sent us to learn from a retired schoolteacher. For a while, we were given lessons altogether, all at once. One of my brothers is actually really good. He kept up with it and started taking lessons again as an adult. Do you play?"

Delphine smiled. "Do I look like I do?"

"It wouldn't surprise me at all if you played three instruments from different families," deadpanned Shay.

Delphine laughed. "You give me too much credit."

"Maybe," Shay agreed in part. "You could tell me you figure skate and I'd probably accept it after a second."

"Figure skate? On the ice?" Delphine guffawed. "That would have to be a thing of the past now. I'm not sure my hip could handle any falls on ice."

"Good point."

Shay struck a tritone on the keyboard, making Delphine wince, and they abandoned the instrument. One plaque on colors earned a small hum of interest from Delphine.

"Something you didn't know?" gasped Shay playfully.

"Physics is not my discipline, chérie," Delphine retorted absentmindedly, stunning Shay into silence. The rebuke didn't mute Shay; the endearment did. Delphine had never used it before—and if it were a slip, Shay couldn't tell by Delphine's subsequent behavior.

(Which signified it hardly meant a thing.)

They stole away from physics and shuffled to a different hall to ensconce themselves in nature. Delphine adopted a contemplative air as they moved from display to display. Shay looked at her inquisitively.

"This is closer to Cosima's discipline," Delphine said.

"You're saying Cosima is into creepy crawlers?"

Delphine smiled. "I can't speak to that. But evolutionary development focuses on tracing and tracking evolution across species, finding points of kinship and derivation, but also trying to
determine what influences developments."

"I feel like I'm flaunting my ignorance here," Shay said, "but you and Cosima studied really different things, right? Or no?"

"Different," Delphine agreed, "but there is considerable overlap. We move in specializations of biology and biochemistry. It can be that the deeper you move into specialization, the more esoteric your work looks like from the outside."

Shay nodded slowly. "So it's not unusual that you work together on the same projects."

The question took a second to percolate but Delphine nodded.

"It's just unusual that she doesn't look like a scientist," Shay added facetiously, smiling.

Delphine shook her head. "You never said whether or not I look like a scientist."

"Well," Shay drawled, "do you?"

"You don't think I look like a scientist?" Delphine asked, sharper than Shay expected. "If I don't look like a scientist, then what do I look like?"

"A model?" Shay hazarded.

Delphine scoffed.

"You can't seriously tell me that people aren't . . . stunned by how beautiful you are," Shay insisted.

Delphine shook her head. "I can think of plenty of reasons someone might have a reaction to me. Sometimes it's because I'm a woman and I sound like I know what I'm talking about or I dared to speak at all. Sometimes it's because I'm foreign and my accent sets me apart."

"Uh huh," Shay followed along drily, "and you never once thought that it was your looks that garnered a reaction?"

The lines of Delphine's face appeared to harden. "I have, yes. Does that make me arrogant? Do I feel any less tired if someone chooses to use that against me to delegitimize or undermine my work?" She met Shay's eyes. "On the other hand, if I chose to make my appearance work for me rather than against me, does that make me less of a scientist? I'm penalized if I try to downplay my appearance. I'm penalized if I'm passive. I'm penalized if I appear like I'm emphasizing my appearance. I'm penalized if I'm seen as making myself attractive. There's no winning. You should know."

There was genuine anger and exasperation in Delphine's response that made Shay defensive in an almost apologetic way. "In my case, people mostly see me as small and harmless. You thought I was a hippie. I don't know if I can parlay that into an advantage. As a massage therapist, I look nice, I guess, like it's okay to let me touch you? But clients doubt my capabilities. It's not as bad as the military. The sergeants used any perceived weakness, any insecurity, any trait they could turn negative to try to wear us down—and we were expected to take it because we were nobodies and nothing until they built us up. It definitely wasn't a place I relished looking 'cute.'"

Silence padded Delphine's response. "That's not what I meant."

Shay exhaled the jangle of nerves that had blossomed and jittered throughout her muscles into a self-deprecating smile. "Me, neither. I was only trying to say that you're beautiful, Delphine. Really beautiful. Honestly."
Delphine mirrored her expression. "That's what I was trying to point out about you."

They both saw the exhibit but by unvoiced accord steered around it in favor of the neighboring exhibits in the building. Process of elimination gradually rendered it the last possible stop before moving on.

The Question of Truth.

They could have ignored it. The hall name instilled wariness. Subdued caution made Delphine's footsteps land heavy and Shay fell quiet. Months ago Delphine might have relished the opportunity to confront alternative, (borderline) anti-scientific modes of thinking, to flaunt the unsound basis before Shay, and press and needle, but the prospect felt daunting in the moment. In the back of Delphine's mind lingered their earlier conversation, the strength of her defensiveness about her appearance, pestered by thoughts of Aldous, of Greg, of knowing very well the effectiveness of allure, the hook baited with enticement, how all these elements played into the expectations and duties of a monitor. Shay's words had cleaved too close.

The exhibit seemed to sense Delphine's diffidence, if an exhibit could be sentient. One section scrutinized the theory and practice of eugenics. Delphine lent it no attention, as if it were below her notice, while Shay gave it a passing perusal, oblivious to connections that could have been drawn to Delphine and the DYAD and the ensuing arguments between herself and Cosima.

The acupuncture module had the most success arresting Shay's attention. She tapped the buttons—representative of pressure points on a model of the human body—and smiled to see the meridians of the body light up. She pressed her fingertips to one half of the decal—the yin or the yang, Delphine wasn't sure—and then they drifted toward the other displays together, without comment.

When they left the room and headed leisurely toward the planetarium—their potential last stop, lest they wanted to brave the outdoors and the trails, sans hats, Shay lamented—Shay said, without looking at Delphine, "I know you think some of my beliefs are silly."

Delphine refrained from response.

"It's why I don't really bring up any of that around you," Shay continued. "I'd love it if you picked up yoga or meditation, of course, but I try those on you because I know that yoga and meditation offer health benefits that even you would have a hard time refuting." Shay crossed her arms. "But those weren't the reasons I started doing them. For me, it was all about balance." Shay inhaled and exhaled sharply. "I was in really bad shape at one point. Like, really bad. And," Shay risked a brief sideways glance, "you know, I don't discredit or discount conventional medicine. I know from experience it can help and I'm prepared if I have to take that option again. Antidepressants got me through the worst of my patches. But taking them was also like riding a rollercoaster. I hated all the trial and error cocktails I had to try to find a prescription and a dose that worked. I was given different drugs in combination, so I was up, I was down, I had no appetite, I was overeating—I hated it. On top of that, it all happened at a time when I wasn't settled. I was bouncing around, practically couchsurfing, so I had no regular doctor to write prescriptions. Keeping up with them got hard."

Shay licked her lips. "It wasn't a new problem, though. My mom, she thought it was the military. 'You should have never joined,' she told me. But the military didn't make me that way. The way I felt, the way I thought, it was all there before, I was just really good at ignoring it or pretending it wasn't a problem." Shay breathed in sharply and exhaled in a gust. "But after the military, when that didn't pan out for me, when it wasn't the secure path that a part of me had hoped it would turn out to be, all those feelings became louder. Overwhelming. I needed a better solution. At the least, a
"The meditation came first. Or maybe accepting my sexuality did. Or maybe they happened together . . . That is, they kinda happened with the same person. I met her, she was into meditation, one thing led to another . . ." Shay smiled, shrugged. "With meditation I discovered this pocket of time where I started to feel centered and with her I started to realize I could live parts of my life openly and that I could be okay with that. Not afraid. Not nervous. Not paranoid. Not guilty.

"My diet changed because of her diet, too. The no-meat thing wasn't even an issue since she was a vegetarian herself. Honestly, you might think I'm a hippie, but I have nothing on her. I mean, like, she could be . . . extreme. But I was eating better, more consciously, and with a lot more enjoyment. Just . . . in general, I was enjoying things again. Like . . . I don't know how to express it . . . but I started feeling like I had the energy and the desire to do things again. Try new things, even. That's when the yoga happened."

Shay nodded to herself. "It's a whole system for me. One part buttresses another part—I eat well and consistently, I exercise, and I try to keep my head clear and positive—and when everything is working, it's like a . . . a wall. Or you know those houses on stilts that raise the foundation above a water line? These activities are like my stilts.

"I don't need other people to understand how it works to know that it works for me. And I know it's not something that can work for everyone—the parts individually or the system altogether—but once I got to a better place, I thought maybe it wouldn't be bad to try to help other people looking for the same thing."

Shay blew out a breath. "It's a good system, but it's not a cure. But there aren't cures in this case. I still have my moments. But I've learned how to recognize an onset and how to get through the choppy waters. I know there's an other side."

Shay adjusted and tightened the fold of her arms. "You know how the other day you talked about your former patient and how her boyfriend broke up with her? You said maybe it had to do with her illness. What goes on with me is not—it's not the same thing. But. Yeah. I've seen it. I get that it's hard. Not everyone likes my choice in how I deal with my problems. I've had people tell me maybe I'm running away from facing the issue head on. They want a fast solution, a permanent one, something that seems reliable and consistent. I know it comes from a good place—they want what's best for me. For them—significant others, especially—I think it's hard to feel like their presence alone doesn't have an effect. They feel like what they offer, what they give—their time, their attention—should make someone happy—and despite their efforts it doesn't seem to work. For reasons they can't understand, the person who says they love them isn't . . . made automatically happy or . . . reassured or . . . buoyed by their presence. When that's the case, how else can you feel except . . . helpless? Resentful. Resented. People don't bargain for that type of emotional labor." Shay shook her head, but a little self-deprecating smile claimed her lips. "I guess love doesn't entirely trump chemistry."

Delphine moved quietly, absorbing everything Shay had just divulged. They'd carried on without slowing throughout the entirety of the speech.

After a period of deep contemplation, Delphine said, "Love is chemistry."

"I knew you were going to say that!" Shay exclaimed, eyes landing accusatorily on Delphine's face. Delphine smiled opaquely but then slipped into solicitous. "I can't say I understand."

"I wouldn't wish that on you or anyone," Shay said, plaintive but frank, without a trace of ire.
"I'm sorry for making you feel that you can't discuss certain topics with me," Delphine said. "I wish I could say I don't understand that, either, but I do."

Shay shrugged. "You're not interested. You're not the only one. I know how that goes."

Delphine struggled to make sense of what she wanted to express. "But you know that I value your thoughts and opinions?"

Shay smiled to herself, amused, cynical.

Delphine frowned to herself. "I wouldn't come to you if I didn't."

Shay shot her a silent, unreadable look.

"Shay," entreated Delphine.

"You might not want to hear this opinion," Shay said.

"What?"

Shay sighed almost imperceptibly. "I'm your sounding board. Which is fine."

"What does that mean?"

"I'm not changing your opinions with mine. You're doing that. By yourself. When you come to talk to me, it's . . . a confirmation process. You're reaffirming conclusions you've already come to on your own."

"That's not true."

"It's not a bad thing, Delphine."

They crossed into the hall dedicated to space exploration and astronomy, bombarded with the raised voices of stimulated children, but proceeded in their own bubble of contention.

"But it's not true," Delphine insisted. "I listen to what you say. Disagreeing on some points doesn't mean I don't respect you."

Shay shook her head. "I didn't say that you disrespect me." She stopped and pivoted to regard Delphine squarely. "Whatever you're struggling with—whenever—I'm glad to be there."

Delphine frowned. "Why are you resisting the idea that you influence me?"

Shay shook her head slowly. "I'm not resisting. I'm acknowledging that we come from completely different perspectives—and that's okay. I'm not friends with you so I can change you. I'm friends with you because I enjoy your company and we get along and you bring me to the science museum I wish we'd had on the prairies growing up."

"But I'm not the same person I was when we met," Delphine said and knew it was true.

"You would have gotten here without me," Shay said, smiling feebly. "Whatever's been nudging you to ask questions, it's not me."

"But would I have made it through intact?" Delphine countered. "You've kept me above the waters." Her voice softened. "It is not for you to determine or quantify what you've done for me."
Shay held her gaze, but glanced away before speaking. "You mean there's no interactive activity station and tried-and-true formula for that?"

Delphine smiled. "Thank you."

Shay raised her eyes, a question in their blue depths.

"For telling me," Delphine clarified.

Shay's expression tightened subtly into hard, uncertain lines. Delphine held out a hand.

"Shall we continue?" Delphine asked.

Shay hesitated, but eventually her hand tucked into Delphine's. Her grip was ginger, like it might slip from Delphine's fingers at any moment.

They ended their day at the Ontario Science Centre in the planetarium, sitting quietly side by side as first the fanciful imaginations of long-dead visionaries formed abstract pictures in the constellations discernible in the swatch of the universe currently stretched above Toronto, then were displayed images of what the ancients couldn't see, planets and stars captured by high-powered lenses, as they were and as present-day imaginations supposed, echoing the efforts of their forebears trying to make sense of the unknown. In the hush of the dark, Delphine felt the presence of those around her like the stars in their incalculable galaxies, numerous and distant and theoretically ballooning out farther, even Shay beside her, their earlier conversation like the vacuum spanning immeasurable, insurmountable lengths.

When they shuffled out of the planetarium with the flow of the queue, Shay scanned Delphine's expression. "What are you thinking?"

"We're made of the substances from stars," Delphine said, "since elements that occur naturally originate from fusion processes in them."

Shay shoved her hands into her pockets and smiled. "All this universe, to the farthest stars and beyond them, is your flesh, your fruit."

Delphine cocked her head. "What is that?"

"Rilke. Since you sounded poetic just now."

"You are casting me in many professions today. Figure skater, model, poet."

Shay grinned. "Did you ever want to be something other than a doctor and a scientist?"

Delphine shook her head slowly. "I did not care what I wanted to be for what seemed like a long time—you know, when you're young, everything happens so much more quickly."

"Yes, because we're so old," Shay said drily.

"Pardon. You're certainly still young."

Shay stuck out her tongue.

Delphine smiled. "I was very good at mathematics, chemistry, and biology, and medicine... seemed like a natural fit. Many suggested it. They said I had the aptitude and the discipline. It was a goal. I'm
good at goals. I make everything else fit into them and, somehow, new ones keep appearing."

"That sounds nice," Shay remarked idly. "You said you make everything fit into your goals, but has there been anything you've had to put aside?"

Delphine's head jerked in a gesture analogous to a shrug.

"That many regrets, huh?" Shay teased.

Then Delphine remembered.

Shay, looking at her, grew somber. "Sorry. I didn't mean to dredge up any bad memories."

Delphine stopped before a model of the solar system, the planets locked in their orbits around the sun. Shay drifted uncertainly to a standstill at her side. Delphine indicated the model with her chin.

"All mass," she said, "exerts a gravitational force. The more mass, the greater the force. Earth orbits the sun, the moon orbits the Earth, the tides rise and fall with the force of the moon."

Shay watched her warily. It was a basic science lesson, one Delphine hoped her friend had been exposed to already.

"The system looks stable to us because it has been functioning for an amount of time difficult for us to grasp and changes on a scale that massive and incremental are undetectable to the naked eye. But did you know the moon is moving slowly away from Earth?"

Shay shook her head.

"In the case of Mars, one of its moons is getting closer. One day it will either break up or collide with the planet."

"Did you take a detour during your studies to contemplate a career as an astronomer?" Shay asked.

Delphine smiled tightly. "I had an ex who liked to tell me facts like that."

The tidbit of information stunned Shay a little.

"He did not see himself fitting into my goals," Delphine said.

"Oh," Shay said quietly. "I'm sor—"

Delphine shook her head. "I didn't mind. It wouldn't have worked. I respected that. But people are like celestial bodies, aren't they? We all have our orbits. We get caught up within the pull of others . . . revolve around one another . . . grow closer . . . drift apart . . ." Delphine fought off a frown.

"Destroy each other."

Shay searched her eyes, gauging Delphine's mood, trying to determine the appropriate response. Delphine dredged the options from their past exchanges: Humor? Sympathy? Attentive and permissive silence?

Delphine smiled because she recognized the effort and that it was exuded on her behalf. "Unlike planets, we can . . . choose to let go."

Shay nodded in consideration. "Though, like planets, sometimes we're drawn and driven by forces we can't control—like our own nature and impulses."
But nature wasn't on Delphine's mind. She thought of monitors, of oblivious but ambitious classmates, of the web that was the DYAD casting out its invisible threads to ensnare all within reach.

Could Delphine let Shay go? For her safety? Did it matter now, with Cosima in the picture? Or was Delphine using Cosima's presence and meddling as an excuse to rationalize her own reluctance to relinquish hold?

Since when was she reluctant to let anyone go?

Delphine swallowed.

"What you told me earlier," Delphine managed, "doesn't change my opinion or how I think." Shay shifted and stood up straighter. "You know that I worry. About you."

Shay smiled stiffly, mouth bordering on the contours of a laugh. "I know."

"I don't worry about many people," Delphine said quietly.

Shay's smile faltered. She studied Delphine silently for a time. Then her mouth curved, soft and tender. "Yes, you do." She reached out and squeezed Delphine's forearm. "You worry all the time. I know you do. I've watched worrying about someone else eat you up for months now."

A sheen of moisture filled the corners of Delphine's eyes. She worried a crack might split her composure.

*Not like that,* she wanted to tell Shay. *Not like this.*

But Delphine wasn't sure she had the clarity or the words to explain what she meant.

What she felt.

Delphine covered Shay's hand.

Shay smiled. "Hungry? I'm feeling kinda Greek today. I'm in the mood for some dolmades."

Delphine cleared her throat. "You don't want to take a look at the outdoor exhibits?"

"Let's come back to see those some other time." Shay slipped her hand out from beneath Delphine's. "Like in the spring or the summer. I'll make sure to bring a hat next time. And I'd like to go to the planetarium again. I really liked that."

"Okay," Delphine said, regathering her composure behind a little smile. "Some other time."

There would be other times.

Delphine wanted there to be other times.

Returning to the car after lunch, stomachs accommodating falafel, hummus, pita, dolmades, and tzatziki, Delphine's footsteps seemed heavy.

"Is your hip acting up?" Shay asked.

Delphine shook her head. "No."
"Good," Shay said, "because I was going to offer to drive but I don't know how you'd feel about that."

A smile flitted across Delphine's lips. She glanced up at the sky. "Did you have fun today?"

"A ton of fun," Shay said. "I feel like today we learned the valuable lesson that karaoke needs to happen."

Delphine snickered to herself. "That might be an option if there's a piano concert in exchange."

Shay grinned. "Sure, one Davydov piano recital—I'll tell my brother to get practicing. He's great, honestly. You'll love it."

Delphine smiled, but there was a melancholy undercast to her mood.

"I had a lot of fun today," Shay assured her, sincere. "Your choice went beyond expectations. Not that that has anything to do with anything. I enjoy when we spend time together."

"So do I," Delphine said. But the sentiment of her tone came across closer to resigned.

"Don't try to sound too excited," Shay teased. "I might figure out how you really feel."

Delphine didn't smile or laugh, but subjected Shay to a long, wordless regard. At last, Delphine asked, "Is there anything else you'd like to do today? Anywhere you'd like to go?"

"Sure, Anthropologie might be having a sale and if not there's always the bookstore," Shay said flippantly.

Delphine opened the driver's side door. "Let's go."

"I was kidding," Shay protested, climbing into the car after Delphine.

"Maybe caffeine first," Delphine said, hitting the ignition button and blithely ignoring Shay's dissent.

"Well," Shay said slowly, securing her seatbelt, "if you're up to it . . ."

Delphine smiled. "Is Tim Hortons okay?"

Left with no more straws of pretense, no plans for the remainder of the day, no clue as to the winds of Delphine's sudden whimsy, Shay surrendered.

"Whatever you feel like, Delphine."

What Delphine felt, Shay couldn't help but suspect, was a reluctance to return so soon to solitude. But maybe Shay was projecting. Maybe she was the one unready to end the day, to reflect on what had transpired and maybe regret having said this and maybe anticipate having to hear that. Maybe Delphine knew what this day needed, a little more time to recalibrate, a little more time to assure one another everything was normal, everything was fine.

Nothing had changed.

Nothing would change.

Chapter End Notes
This was one of those parts where I felt, in approaching it, that it had been a long time coming. It made me apprehensive in writing it. But I hope it turned out well.

From this point forward, updates will most likely be more sporadic. Most of the material up until this point had been written prior to any posts to AO3 and now I've "caught up." Unfortunately, I also took a hiatus in the meantime so now we're all moving forward together.

Let me take this opportunity to thank readers old and new who have given a chance to a fic with a premise that I think would typically turn away many in this niche of the fandom. I'm glad you're along for the ride and I hope you've enjoyed it so far. :)
"Delphine." The tone of the director skirted the edge of condemnatory and suspicious rather than pleasant and pleased at Delphine's unannounced, unplanned early Monday morning visit. The shelf of Aldous's brow broadcast a similar tenor of cautionary assessment, even while he said, "I was in the process of sending you the details of the procedure. We'll proceed tomorrow."

"Good. Thank you," Delphine said curtly. "I'll review the information."

"But that's not why you're here," Aldous intoned without humor.

"I've been thinking about Jennifer," Delphine said.

Aldous's hand shot up to obstruct any contingent thought. "Our options and resources are limited at the moment. That's not to point out that we haven't undergone a trial yet."

Delphine took a seat, shaking her head. "I was thinking about how two more cases followed Jennifer, Katja and Cosima."

The director's gaze rested keen and watchful on Delphine, like that of a keeper alert to the instincts untamed and undomesticated in a captive creature.

Delphine continued as if unperturbed. "The interval between the occurrence of symptoms between Katja and Cosima was shorter than the one between Jennifer and Katja." Delphine leveled Aldous with a look. "It stands to reason that given that the clones were born clustered across a short period of months that they may have all matured and developed in parallel at a similar pace, if not the same pace—which could have also encompassed the maturation of this disease." Delphine tapped her lips. "Are there other cases, Aldous?"

His face retained a structured neutrality that betrayed the answer.

Delphine covered her eyes with a hand, then let her hand fall. "I want to see them. I want to see the cases."

"They're above your security clearance."

"So there's more than one," concluded Delphine, voice hard and straining against the impatience and impotence ballooning behind a wall of restraint. "Is that why you didn't tell me? Why? What is the point of withholding that type of information from me?"

"They haven't contributed materially to what we already know," Aldous cautioned.

"Contributed—" Delphine shook her head. "What is being done for them? Are they being treated by our staff? Where?"

Aldous leaned forward, forearms on the desk. "At the moment, we are embarking on the most promising treatment. This is not the time to seek a stroking for your ego. You need to focus."

Delphine stared at him until her respiration calmed. "Why did you choose me to be Cosima's monitor, Aldous? Why did you assign me to Jennifer?"

Aldous swiped at his mouth, unsuccessfully trying to erase the ire etched into the lines at the corners. "You wanted it, didn't you?"
They maintained locked eye contact. Delphine breathed out slowly. "Will you be attending tomorrow?"

"I think you should have everything well in hand," Aldous said.

Delphine pushed herself to her feet, avoiding his eyes. "I'll contact you if there are any questions or concerns."

She felt Aldous's eyes on her. "You do that."

Upon entering the lab, Cosima intuited Delphine's short, bitter mood with remarkable speed and took a direct route to her desk in a subdued air of silence.

Delphine checked her lingering irritation. She covered it up with airiness and proclaimed, "The procedure has been scheduled for tomorrow, noon."

Cosima swiveled. She scanned Delphine's expression, then nodded hesitantly. "Okay."

"I'm meeting with the technicians later," Delphine added, tone easing into a more natural timbre, "to brief and prepare. Would you like to join us?"

Cosima nodded.

The technicians were a pair of women sweet, attentive, personable, and effortlessly responsive and reassuring to Cosima and her questions and concerns, which let Delphine, incapable and unwilling in the present to exert any of those qualities, fade into the background. The anesthesiologist, a pixie-haired platinum blonde named Dana Culvers, surveyed Cosima on her health and habits that started structured, but then dipped into freewheeling abandon when Cosima freely volunteered she smoked marijuana. No one raised an eyebrow, but shortly thereafter ensued a passionate, three-way argument about the best ice cream flavors and the most delectable frozen treats.

"I'm talking about the classics," Cosima insisted. "The real classics. Like Eskimo Pie."

"You'd take that over an It's-It?" Culvers marveled.

"You know what an It's-It is? How? That's, like, so regional to San Fran. Are you from San Fran?"

"No, but I've been there."

"And had It's-Its."

"They're amazing."

Cosima sat back in her chair, throwing up a hand in defeat. "I can't argue with that."

The topic expanded to the evaluation of the wide array of "munchies," a whole category of edibles that encompassed brand name junk foods that evoked little recognition from Delphine but plenty of animation from her companions, until Culvers circled back to obtain a ballpark estimate of how much marijuana Cosima smoked over a set period of time. The opportunity let Culvers issue a reminder: "Please refrain from now until the procedure."

"I'll try my best," Cosima deadpanned.

"Another thing: You're going to be conscious," Culvers explained, "unless you'd rather not be?"
"And miss the Magic School Bus special starring my body?" Cosima cracked. "Keep me conscious all the way."

The technicians relaxed under Cosima's cavalier display, though throughout the briefing's outset they'd sent frequent furtive glances in Delphine's direction to gauge the atmosphere. Delphine sat stone-faced, far less interesting or engaging than their patient, and in a short span the technicians stopped consulting her reactions.

"There may be discomfort following the procedure," warned the implantation tech, a frank-eyed young woman named Simi Srivas who vouched for the greatness of mango-flavored ice cream.

"Not to mention that it will take time for the anesthesia to wear off," Culvers added.

Srivas nodded. "You may experience cramping or aches and soreness afterward. We don't know what to expect, exactly, but such side effects are typical in these types of procedures."

They looked to Delphine.

"Would you like to keep her overnight under observation?" Srivas asked.

Cosima raised a hand. "If I have a say, I'd rather not."

"We all agree that this is an outpatient procedure?" Delphine queried. The team nodded. Delphine mirrored the gesture. "Then we'll plan for it as such for now and gauge it one step at a time. If needed, we can arrange for a room afterward. I'll oversee any additional considerations, no need to worry."

The session fostered a sense of ease and familiarity that probably did more than reviewing the actual logistics, though Delphine felt better prepared for having laid out the latter. Upon adjournment Cosima even swept the technicians away for a beverage run that Delphine declined to join.

No one looked sorry or saddened by her decision, though Cosima took a look back as she and the technicians shuffled out. Alone, Delphine deliberated and made a call.

"Hello? Is this the office of Marion Bowles? Ah. Yes. I understand. My name is Dr. Delphine Cormier and I'm calling to leave a message for Ms. Bowles. Ah, Dr. Bowles, yes. Please inform her that, if it is at all possible, there is a matter I wish to discuss with her."

* 

The procedure transpired without incident or complication, but with none of the levity that had buoyed the briefing. The image of the polyps magnified upon the screen cast a heavy pall upon the room and Delphine suspected that the technicians felt gratitude for the layer of obfuscation afforded by the surgical masks. Delphine, scrutinizing the camera's feed, did. Maybe for that reason Culvers and Srivas departed with exuberant good will, goodbyes, and well wishes for their patient. Cosima thanked them and added, "And thanks for not sucking out all the pink of my insides, even though no one would notice."

"Maybe next time, Peebles," Srivas replied and everyone giggled except for Delphine.

With their departure Cosima settled into convalescence, lying in bed propped up by a mountain of assorted pillows, her laptop balanced atop her lap. She interrupted her reading and browsing with pauses to rub her fingertips together and poke at her middle with the occasional mutter of, "That's so weird."
"Sensation will return," Delphine chided after a few rounds of this behavior.

"Have you experienced this before?" Cosima wondered aloud. "It's like a fullbody novocaine experience. I'm making like a hundred typos. I can't even feel the heat of my laptop."

"I have not." Delphine frowned. "Should we put a pillow on your lap?"

Cosima ignored Delphine's concern, fixated on the ceiling in thought, and then glanced over. "What happened to bring you and Shay together? How did you get tangled up with a massage therapist?"

Delphine raised an eyebrow. She felt a small spike of humor (and camaraderie) to think that Jennifer had discerned the telltale of her injury without reason or motivation to look, but Cosima seemed none the wiser despite prolonged exposure to one another. Perhaps an athlete was more in tune with the body's capabilities, limits, and breakdowns. The passage of time—and such a length of time, Delphine realized upon reflection—may have also diminished the echoes of her injuries.

Delphine licked her lips. "I sustained an injury, my physical therapist recommended I supplement my recovery with massage, I went to Shay."

Cosima smirked. "How do you go from laying yourself out on a massage table to bringing wine to your massage therapist?"

Delphine shook her head, smothering a tight smile of exasperation.

"Does that mean you don't know how that happened or it's none of my business?" Cosima held up a hand to forestall the obvious objection. "Let me ask a different question: Was it Shay who first extended the branch of friendship or was it you?"

Delphine loosed the smile. "Did you ask Shay?"

"I'm asking you."

"What does it matter?"

"It doesn't," Cosima groused, "I'm just curious. It's not like you two make a lot of sense on the surface."

"I think Shay feels the same way about you and me."

"Yeah, but I can see how her thinking that we don't make sense makes sense. You and Shay—"

Cosima shook her head. "You get what I'm saying, right?" She focused on the ceiling. "Shay's not my actual monitor, is she?"

"What?" Delphine gasped, blindsided by the sense and depth of offense that burst within her.

Cosima glanced over at her. "You said it yourself: potential bosom buddy prospects are paraded in front of a subject to see if she'll 'choose' them."

Delphine stared at her. "What?"

"Yeah, you know, the more I think about it, the more it seems possible. If I had been, like, studying me and my behavior and my personality, and I wanted to spring the perfect trap . . ." Cosima cocked her head. "I mean, I guess a beautiful woman as my work companion and 'supervisor' wouldn't be a bad strategy, but coming off a bad experience with a pushy monitor like I did . . . someone like Shay is perfect fodder."
"That's . . ." Delphine shook her head. "No."

"You wouldn't have to know, you know," Cosima said. "Hence a double blind."

Dread sank Delphine's heart. She shook her head against it.

Cosima smirked. "Are you shaking your head because you're thinking, 'No way, this is Shay we're talking about'? Because that doesn't mean anything. Beth didn't think her boyfriend was spying on her and I had no clue about my girlfriend. These were people we liked, people we trusted."

"I knew Shay before I met Jennifer."

Cosima shrugged. "She didn't have to be a plant from the beginning for her to be under DYAD's thumb now. You don't think DYAD could entice her to do their bidding? Everyone has a price, isn't that the principle behind their operation? Shay's no different from anyone else. I mean, her place is pretty nice. She wasn't wrong about the rent being pricey." Cosima pushed herself into a more upright sitting position. "She could be providing reports on you. Can't you see it? DYAD as its own surveillance state."

Delphine's gaze went flinty. "She doesn't even know where I work."

"She doesn't have to know to give DYAD what they want to know. That's the beauty of the monitor system. The people at the top of the observation chain get what they need and none of the participants or targets are any wiser."

Delphine considered.

Cosima cocked an eyebrow. "What, you don't want to think she's capable of doing what you're capable of doing?"

Features wrestled into neutral, Delphine maintained eye contact with Cosima. Then she smiled.

"What?" Cosima asked.

"I'm thinking about something Shay told me the other day."

"What?" Cosima prodded.

Delphine shook her head. "Let's just say that if she's a spy, she's doing a very poor job."

"Or maybe she's a master spy and she's gotten you to let your guard down," Cosima argued.

Was worming behind her guard Shay's aim when she confessed to wanting to ask Delphine an endless assortment of questions?

If so, it worked.

And at the time, Delphine hadn't minded.

Delphine studied Cosima. "You don't believe in the likelihood of Shay being a DYAD agent."

"It's not about the likelihood, it's about the paranoia." Cosima smiled with facetious cheerfulness. "Welcome to the trip."
"You're sure you feel fine? You'll be okay alone tonight?" Delphine asked at Cosima's door.

"You offering to stay the night, Dr. Cormier?" Cosima quipped.

"If needed," Delphine said.

Cosima wagged her eyebrows. "That's a tantalizing offer."

"I'm serious."

"I'm into serious women," Cosima needled, incorrigible. Delphine opened her mouth but Cosima preempted her. "Complete sensation returned over an hour ago. I'm not feeling any discomfort, but Dana and Simi said I could take an aspirin or ibuprofen if I develop any pain—a prescription you agreed with. Besides, if I need any tender loving care, Shay's right downstairs." At Delphine's admonishing look. Cosima added, "I'm kidding. Maybe."

Delphine shook her head. "If something happens, call me."

"Like if the electricity goes out and I'm plunged into darkness, feeling alone and scared?"

Delphine suppressed a sigh. "I'll be on call. Good night."

"Hey, hypothetical question," Cosima called after her retreating back. "If Shay and I called at the same time, whose call would you answer?"

Delphine rolled her eyes and borrowed a page from Cosima's playbook, throwing a hand up in a gesture that was both farewell wave and dismissal.

* *

Delphine stopped at Shay's door on her way out. When Shay answered, Delphine said, "Hey. I just wanted to say good night."

Shay smiled but the degree of curvature and the depth of the depressions at the corners of her mouth appeared subdued. "You're becoming like the friendly neighborhood Spider-Man. Spider-Woman."

At Delphine's look of confusion, Shay leaned against the door, smile widening at last with unvented laughter.

"I know the character," Delphine said defensively. "I don't see how he applies to me or this situation, however."

"You know, he drops in unexpectedly, saves the day, cracks a joke to lighten the mood."

Delphine favored Shay with a dry expression. "I see only one of the three points applying to our situation."

Shay grinned. "I'd say two out of three now. Do you want to come in?"

Delphine shook her head. "No, thank you. I should go get dinner."

"I made salmon," Shay said. "There's some left over."

"Thank you, but no. I'll go now." She kissed Shay on both cheeks. "Ciao. Oh, if Cosima comes down and she looks unwell, can you let me know?"
"Let you know? Why, is she sick?"

Delphine nodded, the lie constructing itself rapidly. "She seemed to be feeling a little under the weather today. We're scheduled to start early tomorrow, but if we need to push back the start time, I could use the . . . heads up?"

Delphine saw the mistake of her ploy in the way Shay glanced in the direction of the elevator.

"She's probably resting now," Delphine said to ward off Shay. "No need to bother her. Plus, I would rather not have her think I'm talking about her without her knowing."

Shay shook her head. "You two. Alright. I'll let you know, but now that you put it that way, I'm not going to feel great about it."

"Sorry," Delphine said, wondering if an apology could cover unspecified, unexpressed transgressions. "I appreciate your help."

Shay loosed a skeptical hum, eyes both teasing and considering.

"I'll make it up to you," Delphine offered. "Another activity weekend."

A giggle lurked in the smile that answered Delphine. "That might be worth it. But not this weekend. A friend is visiting and I'm playing hostess and tour guide."

"Sounds fun," Delphine said. It seemed the thing to say.

"Hopefully," Shay chirped. "I'll do my best, anyway."

Delphine smiled. "You'll do fine."

"I shouldn't have to do fine, like it's a performance I have to put on," Shay grumbled. But her pique quickly transitioned into a self-satisfied smile. "If she's really my friend, she'll be happy and satisfied just to see me and spend time with me."

Delphine laughed. "Is that how friendship works?"

"That and complaining to one another, complimenting each other, sharing life hacks," Shay said, smile going crooked. "The usual stuff."

Delphine's eyes narrowed in thought. "Is our friendship lacking some of those elements?"

"Which ones?"

"I feel like I haven't received any life hacks," Delphine said with a studied air.

"You have: they're called yoga and meditation. But you keep ignoring me when I try to tell you about them."

Brow dimpling in concentration, Delphine cocked her head. "Did you hear something just now?"

Shay moved forward as if to shove her, but gave Delphine a poke in the bicep instead. Well-insulated against the assault in her heavy coat, Delphine chuckled.

"Get going," Shay urged Delphine gently. "Unless you want to come inside and meditate with me."

"With an ultimatum like that . . ." Delphine teased. "Good night."
Shay gave her a tight-cornered smile. "Good night."

When Delphine pulled into her designated parking spot in her apartment building's underground garage, a black town car rolled up behind in perpendicular and boxed in her car. Delphine exited her vehicle slowly as the town car's driver, an imposing man barely contained within the seams of a black suit, stepped out. Delphine stood beside her car, within the open door, prepared to leap back in if need be. Thoughts of Greg and Cosima's previous monitor, of unknown surveillance and informants, flitted through her mind.

"Dr. Cormier?"

"Yes," Delphine confirmed hesitantly. Her phone was in her purse. She would have trouble retrieving it. Who would she call? The police? What was the emergency services number in Canada?

The man opened the back door of the town car. Delphine peered inside. The back seat was empty. "Dr. Bowles will see you. I'll take you to her." When Delphine remained rooted to the spot, he gestured to the leather interior. "Please."

It was a jarringly humble request from the mouth of an intimidating man. (Justifiably frightening; Delphine did not have a difficult time imagining those hands around her neck.) Delphine stepped away reluctantly from the sense of safety afforded by her car and locked it. The man watched her with impassive patience. When she lowered herself into the town car, he shut the door behind her and resumed his place behind the wheel. The sliver of his face Delphine glimpsed in the rearview mirror remained unreadable.

The drive was quiet. Delphine asked no questions, the man made no comments, and nothing emitted from the speakers. By the landscape rolling by, Delphine tracked their journey into downtown and ruminated on Marion Bowles. Not much information floated in the realms of cyberspace regarding the woman. Her name cropped up here and there in philanthropic fashion, but no network materialized to point to a place of origin, to a set affiliation, to a discernible center of power and influence.

Invisibility could be a form of power. The problem was that Delphine couldn't gauge if Dr. Bowles was, in fact, powerful. An attitude and a kidnapping didn't prove anything.

The car stopped before a restaurant. The driver exited and opened the car door for her. When she stepped out, he informed her, "Tell the maître d' you're with Marion Bowles."

The name wreaked the magic implicitly promised in the instructions. Aldous's notoriety had a similar pull at certain venues.

Delphine was escorted past other diners in a lively and stately space with vaulted ceilings, where the light of small tea candles reflected off crisp white table linens, and shown to a private room outside which stood another suited sentry. Inside the lone occupant at table was Dr. Bowles, a plate of what appeared to be grilled chicken before her, mostly intact. She smiled at Delphine and gestured to an empty seat across from her.

"Hello, Dr. Cormier. Come join me. Have you eaten yet?"

Delphine indicated she hadn't. Dr Bowles had a menu brought, which was delivered along with a place setting of glasses, plates, utensils, and a napkin.

"Apologies for the delay in getting back to you, but business called," Dr. Bowles said. She didn't
continue and Delphine hesitated, unsure if the silence were an invitation to state her concerns. It wasn't. Dr. Bowles continued, "The steak is an excellent choice if you're undecided. I can vouch for the seafood linguine as well. It's one of my favorites."

Delphine consulted the menu as she was being bid and forewent both suggestions and ordered the gnocchi.

Dr. Bowles smiled as Delphine placed her order, but only went so far as to ask, "Would you like something to drink?"

"Water is fine, thank you."

Dr. Bowles nodded and returned to her meal in silence. The gnocchi appeared with tremendous speed. Delphine, still uncertain of the protocol, tucked into the dish with trepidation. After a time, Dr. Bowles set her knife and fork upon the edge of the plate and watched her. Delphine soon followed her example.

Dr. Bowles beheld her with a sheen of amusement that Delphine would have categorized as the type reserved for pets. "You wanted to speak to me."

Delphine dabbed at her mouth and restored the napkin across her lap. "Yes."

"Our last conversation was cut short," Dr. Bowles remarked in idleness. "But last time I caught you unawares."

Delphine rolled in her lips to moisten them but kept all thoughts to herself.

Dr. Bowles tilted her head. "No comment on tonight's circumstances?"

"I'm not sure I'm entitled to comment when I requested to meet you."

Dr. Bowles smiled. Not nice, not hostile. Opaque. "Everyone has opinions. I expect you have many opinions about many things, one of which you wanted to discuss with me."

Delphine nodded. "Yes."

Dr. Bowles inclined her head in permission.

"When we last spoke, you mentioned other cases of subjects being ill."

Dr. Bowles nodded.

"I was hoping you could provide me copies of the files on those cases."

Dr. Bowles interlaced her fingers and rested them against her middle. She gazed at Delphine long and silently. At last, she asked, "Where does Aldous stand on this?"

"He said it was above my security clearance," Delphine stated.

"And you argued . . . ?"

"I said it's relevant to the work Cosima and I are doing to know the status of the others and the care being provided for them," Delphine said.

Dr. Bowles gazed up at the light fixture, an elegant multi-planed piece. "We all consider our work important from our limited perspective. From yours, how would you rate Aldous's handling of
It was not an answer to her request or a question for which Delphine was prepared. Delphine shook her head slowly. "I don't know the scope of his responsibilities. I couldn't say."

"From your experience as a monitor," Dr. Bowles amended casually, sending a chill across the back of Delphine's neck, "how would you evaluate the system?"

"The great and continual surprise is that the methodology is so simple and that, as a result, it's able to adapt to many circumstances," Delphine said carefully. "However, I would consider my own experience unique rather than standard. I relate to Cosima much more as her physician and lab partner than I do as her monitor."

"Do you think the system has merit? If it were up to you, would you maintain it?"

Delphine sat speechless for a moment. "With the alternative being to dismantle or dissolve it?"

"The possibility hasn't occurred to you?" Dr. Bowles asked lightly.

It hadn't. Whatever her thoughts and feelings on monitors and being one, Delphine hadn't considered the monitors not existing. How else would DYAD keep track of the clones? How else would they gather data?

"I don't understand," Delphine said slowly. "What would replace the monitor system?"

"If that were your responsibility, that would be up to you," Dr. Bowles said in the bored tone of stating the obvious.

Delphine brainstormed briefly. At the end of her mental gymnastics she shook her head. "I'm not sure what would happen. If the monitors were eliminated, the clones might be . . . lost. Untrackable. Untraceable. Unreachable. Vulnerable. Though an option would be to elicit voluntary participation, perhaps through a front program or . . . by revealing the truth to each one. However, the latter scenario taints behavioral studies."

"Interesting," Dr. Bowles said. When Delphine caught Dr. Bowles's eyes when she raised hers in startlement, she got the impression that Dr. Bowles passed pronouncement on more than Delphine's projections. "Do you consider Cosima less notable as a subject of study due to her self-awareness?"

Delphine paused. "Her biology will always be of interest and relevant to study. She's also mature enough in age that questions of nature versus nurture may perhaps have largely been answered." Delphine weighed her next disclosure. "She and Jennifer are very different. In their temperaments and how they interact with me. But much of that may be attributable to Cosima's self-awareness, at least in her behavior toward me. Which is not to say she isn't interesting."

"So if you were to inherit overseeing the program tomorrow, you would maintain it?"

"Wouldn't that be my mandate?" countered Delphine.

"If its fate were in your hands," Dr. Bowles amended, undeterred.

"I imagine that dismantling the monitor program would require thought and planning." Delphine tucked her hair behind an ear, an almost girlish gesture that wasn't typical of her. She'd expected to be nervous, but about putting in an audacious appeal, not because of an examination. "There's also the question of whether or not we have any obligations to the subjects, regarding such things as their health or safety."
"Would you like to run the program?" Marion Bowles asked in plain language.

Delphine withstood Dr. Bowles's cool assessment. "Not at the moment."

"But you want the access conferred by the responsibility of running this portion of the Project," pointed out Dr. Bowles.

"I want to be able to do the job I've been assigned to do."

"According to Aldous's judgment, you are. You didn't have to come to me."

Delphine didn't break eye contact. "Will you help me?"

Dr. Bowles sat quiet a second, then she glanced at her plate, a small smile forming on her lips. "Thank you for joining me for dinner. Eric will drive you back."

"You didn't answer my question, Dr. Bowles."

"Patience, Dr. Cormier. Our work here is predicated on it. I know that can be hard to appreciate for one as young and accomplished as yourself."

"Tell that to the clones who are young and dying."

"Aren't we all dying?" Dr. Bowles replied archly.

On cue, a suited man appeared at Delphine's elbow. It was the driver. She hadn't heard or noticed his entrance. Delphine glanced at Dr. Bowles. Dr. Bowles nodded. Almost genially.

Delphine was dismissed.

*"

From Shay [23:21]: Not a peep from Cosima.
To Shay [23:22]: You didn't need to keep me updated. But thank you.
From Shay [23:22]: Just in case you were worrying. I'm off to sleep. Good night.
To Shay [23:23]: Good night.
"You got Leekie's invitation?" Cosima asked, leaning against the kitchen counter and blowing across the top of a freshly steeped mug of steaming tea.

Delphine longed for a cigarette to have in hand, though she wasn't sure Cosima would have appreciated a (nominal) guest smoking in her kitchen. Cosima hadn't much appreciated the early morning wake up call that was Delphine dropping in on short notice. Delphine had sent a message before she set out without waiting for a reply, aware the message was not an inquiry or request and that she (conveniently) wouldn't be able to respond to any denials en route, and yet had still been mildly (and perhaps with some satisfaction) surprised when Cosima had greeted her knocks on the door more or less promptly, albeit blearily and irritably in a bathrobe. Delphine's haste had evidently claimed its own price; she'd missed the arrival in both their inboxes of the referenced email.

"I'm reading it now," Delphine said, focused on her phone. It was a short message. They were expected to be in Aldous's office by noon.

"At least he proposed a reasonable hour," Cosima groused. Delphine let the remark slide. She didn't consider her hours unreasonable. Cosima continued, "He contacted both of us for once. What do you think he wants?"

"Perhaps he wishes to check in with you following the procedure," Delphine posited.

"He can't come visit me, I have to visit him?" Cosima wondered.

"Hierarchy," Delphine muttered, mindful of the previous night's summons.

"Yeah? Then what does it signify that you've come to me this morning?"

"It means I'm concerned for your health and wanted to see you first thing," Delphine responded offhandedly. "Just so you know, I'm happy to see that you look well."

"I'd be better with more sleep. You should have dropped in on Shay and given me more time—she keeps ungodly hours. Or, better, you could have just asked me how I was feeling through the convenience of telecommunication and I would have told you that I'm fine."

"Shay does keep early hours," Delphine said, "but calling on her unannounced would have been discourteous. Besides, I will drive you to the lab and save you the trouble of arranging transportation."

"At what greater cost." Cosima glared in her direction. "I'm going to get dressed. Seeing as how this is my apartment, I'm not going to hide in the bathroom." She put aside her mug of tea. "That's your warning."

"It's true, then, that you Americans are particular about nudity?" Delphine wondered.

Cosima paused in her trek toward the bedroom area. "I'm not really, but just in case you are."

Delphine smiled to herself. "That's what I thought. You never seemed particularly troubled during any of the exams."

Cosima rolled her eyes in a dismissal and proceeded to get attired for the day. Delphine, despite her teasing, kept her back turned to the spectacle, which by aural indications seemed to include rounds of
contemplation, trials, rejection, and finally, after some time, Cosima disappearing into the bathroom after all. She emerged with eyes fully lined.

"Alright, I can't believe I'm going to be at work before ten," Cosima muttered, shrugging into outerwear and gathering bags. "You want to say hi to Shay before we roll out?"

"Maintaining earlier work hours would not be a bad habit to form," Delphine commented blithely. "And, no, better not to disturb Shay."

Cosima opened the door to usher Delphine out, smirking. "You just don't want to be seen with me early in the morning. You don't want to give her ideas."

"Give her ideas?" Delphine echoed, brow furrowing.

Cosima's lips curved in a bent of victory but shaped no answers as she shut the door securely behind them.

* * *

At noon Aldous inquired promptly after Cosima's health. Cosima, lighter some ounces of blood thanks to Delphine's ministrations and science's demands, shot Delphine a knowing glance.

"Still alive," Cosima answered drily as she crossed before the director's desk to drop herself inelegantly into a chair, "but you have to wait until the lab results get back to gauge how alive. I'm not sprouting any extra limbs yet."

"Well," Aldous drawled, "we can only hope."

Adjusting to get comfortable, Cosima gripped the armrests and cocked her head. "We can only hope in which direction? That I keep my current number of limbs or add to them? Because I'll tell you right now that I'm not interested in sprouting certain body mods considered vogue by Neolutionists."

Aldous's eyes narrowed. He leaned back in his seat, elbows on the armrests of his high-backed chair, hands stepling before his face, fingertips touching. "Neolutionism isn't about forcing modifications onto anyone, but promoting the options to have that choice and defending the right to make it."

"So how come we're not having a conversation about the ethics of designer human beings?" Cosima rebutted.

Aldous pursed his lips. "We should have that conversation." The line of his gaze darted over and past Cosima's shoulder. "But not right now."

Delphine and Cosima twisted in their seats. Through the glass they observed a young man shuffle into the hallway, posture slumped with uncertainty, dressed as if he had grabbed articles of clothing nearest at hand in a rush to get to class. Cosima spared the sight only a second's glance before whirling around in her seat, eyes landing angry on Aldous.

Aldous gestured for the man to join them.

The young man slunk into the room under the burden of their collective focus.

"Hello, Scott," Aldous called to him grandly and the picture coalesced for Delphine. "Did you enjoy the tour?"

"Y-yes, thank you, Dr. Leekie," the young man managed. Delphine gave him another evaluation
through the lens of his identity. This was Scott Smith. Cosima's university friend. (Acquaintance?) He glanced at first at Delphine with open startlement, then settled his attention at last on Cosima. He lifted a hand in a meek wave. "Hi, Cosima."

"Scott," Cosima named him, voice low, with what very much sounded like the anger she'd flashed at Aldous barely contained in her tone.

Aldous smiled. "Scott, you know Cosima. This is Dr. Cormier. She'll be your supervisor."

Delphine stood and offered her hand. Scott's grip was light, cautious, around Delphine's hand and he released a nervous titter when Delphine said, "Enchantée."

"You said you were looking for a sequencing tech," Aldous said grandly to Cosima. "Fortune must have heard you, because soon after Scott came to us." Aldous glanced at the aforementioned prospect standing hapless and squeamish. His nervousness, Delphine noted, seemed to have little to do with Aldous. Scott couldn't quite look at Cosima. "Dr. Cormier and Cosima will get you caught up to speed and acclimated. The sooner, the better. I'm sure you have a lot to discuss."

Cosima, rooted in her seat, glared at the director. Delphine gently laid her fingertips upon Cosima's shoulder.

"Let's go," she urged the smoldering woman.

Cosima remained seated longer than Delphine expected. Delphine imagined the torrent of invective gathering behind the dash of Cosima's stern mouth, the confrontation threatening to explode. Tension gathered right beneath Delphine's ribcage in anticipation. But Cosima's jaw flexed and she stood without a word. Delphine herded them out.

The trip to the old wing was strangled with silence. Cosima glared at everything but refused to look at anyone. Scott shuffled with his head bowed, sneaking in glances at Cosima or Delphine. Delphine repressed a sigh and the imminent pressure she felt building behind her temple.

When they reached the lab, Delphine gently suggested that Scott try the badge he'd been given. The lock sounded an approving peal at the touch of the plastic. By all appearances, Aldous had instated Scott into full employment.

The first words out of Cosima's mouth when the lab door closed behind them were, "I get final say on personnel."

"Cosima," Scott objected while Delphine, taking up the rear, crossed her arms and nodded.

"You do," Delphine affirmed.

"And I told you," Cosima vented, whirling on Scott, "not to pursue getting a job here."

Scott crossed his arms. It had the somewhat unfortunate effect of making him appear like a large toddler in a huff. "I don't get what the big deal is. You work here. What's wrong if I work here? I can help you. I've been helping you this whole time—"

Cosima raised a hand, shaking her head. "No. No. I mean, yeah, sorry, I shouldn't have asked for your help. But. You don't get it. You can't be here. You have to—"

"I know about the clones."

Delphine, who had been listening in discomfited disinterest and contemplating leaving the room to
grant them privacy, raised her head in alert.

"What?" Cosima said, taking a step toward Scott, eyes fixated on his face with intensity.

Scott wrapped his arms more tightly around himself. "I know about the clones. The human clones. The ones with the marker tags."

The last bit made Delphine look to Cosima. For all of a second, Cosima looked sheepish. Then she refused to be contrite. Defiance squared her jaw.

"I don't know what you're talking about," Cosima said stubbornly.

So Scott illustrated his deduction.

As she watched his thought process unfold on the board, Delphine found she had to bite back a smile. She couldn't decide which aspect was a shame: That Scott had the misfortune to be Cosima Niehaus's friend or that he had the misfortune to possess enough knowledge, perception, and intuition to be right.

* 

"So," Delphine said softly in the private conference space of the abandoned old wing hall, "Scott is here."

Cosima crossed her arms, hung her head, and stared at her feet.

"To stay?" Delphine prompted. "You can still exercise your right of approval."

Cosima inhaled sharply and pressed her palms into the sides of her head. "The thing is... Scott's actually a good sequencing tech." Her hands dropped listlessly to her sides, only for her right hand to rally and nudge her glasses back up the bridge of her nose. "We could use one."

Delphine nodded. "And he managed to see to the heart of the project."

Cosima straightened up, eyes quick to catch Delphine's. "Not the whole picture."

Delphine nodded, more slowly. "Not about the extent of your involvement, yes. If that's to remain the case, we will have to be careful how we speak around him. No more open discussions." She studied Cosima. "So you will confirm his employment?"

Cosima's jaw worked. "At this point I'm not sure I can say no and not cause more problems. I mean, what if Leekie found out the extent of what Scott knows? Although—jeez—what if this is all a setup and Scott's my new monitor?"

Delphine entertained the suggestion. It wasn't outside the realm of possibility. Delphine had floated the tactic with Aldous once upon a time—but that was before she'd beheld Scott in person. The introduction made her less sure of Scott's potential as an avenue for Aldous's machinations. (Or Scott's demeanor provided the perfect disarmament as a vehicle for infiltration.) But possibility didn't determine reality. A taste of Cosima's penchant for bottomless speculations put Delphine off of the pastime.

"At some point," Delphine said softly, "you're going to have to put limitations on your paranoia."

Cosima glanced at her. "Trust no one."

Delphine raised an eyebrow.
Cosima smirked. "It's not paranoia if they're really out to get you."

Delphine's forehead furrowed. As she fumbled for something to add, her lips parted, but Cosima continued, adding unabated, "Paranoid is what they call people who imagine threats against their life. I have threats against my life."

"Am I missing something?" Delphine asked cautiously.

Cosima sighed. "Now we have to keep Scottie around, if only to have someone capable of appreciating what just happened here."

Ignoring the criticism of some unknown deficiency in her personality, Delphine hazarded, "So... we're keeping him?"

Cosima cocked an eyebrow. "We?"

"I will be supervisor to you both," Delphine pointed out patiently.

Cosima smirked but the expression held no opposition or rancor. "Yeah. We're keeping him. For his own good." She looked uncertainly into Delphine's face. "Will you help me?"

"Help you?" Delphine asked.

Cosima paused. "To protect Scott."

Delphine exhaled a measured breath. "You know that I cannot guarantee your safety—or even mine? I can't make promises regarding his." She paused. "Not when I would prioritize yours."

Cosima's chin lifted in a modicum of surprise. Their eyes held. Delphine moistened her lips. "Scott could better protect himself if he were made aware of the dangers posed by possessing his knowledge."

"Is there danger?" Cosima asked her pointedly.

"I believe there is," Delphine said. "You do, too. If there's no potential for harm, Aldous could not leverage Scott's welfare to ensure your good behavior."

Cosima shrugged noncommittally, eyes darting off to the side. "Instilling a perception of danger can be enough."

"You think there is no real danger?" Delphine asked, unable to keep the shock from her voice.

Cosima deflated with a sigh. "No. I think it's too real. Rachel was willing to dig my grave to get at Sarah—by issuing an official order to suspend all testing. Leekie crossed her, but he didn't sound too happy about it. On top of that, I can't ignore that Rachel clearly thinks I'm expendable."

Delphine crossed her arms and briefly bowed her head, contemplating the tips of her shoes. "There are those of us who do care. Aldous... he's one of them. He cares, in his way."

Cosima tipped her head back with a soft groan. "Are you trying to sell me on Leekie?"

Delphine pressed fingers to her mouth. "I'm suggesting you pick your battles. This..." She heaved a short, impatient sigh at the insufficiency of her word choice. "This game isn't necessarily chess. Scott isn't a pawn on a board. He has his own agency. Even should Aldous attempt to use Scott for his own ends, if approached correctly, Aldous could be your ally in certain matters. He did take your side on the issue of the treatment, for example."
"Ally? Right now he's flaunting my friend in my face like a sacrificial lamb." Cosima frowned. "Or he's turned my friend into a mole."

"I thought I was the mole," Delphine cracked. Cosima's look sharpened on her face. Delphine smiled. The effort felt tired.

Cosima looked away, eyebrows drawn tight, expression uncertain and turbulent.

"Not every face harbors an enemy," Delphine remarked in a gentler tone.

Cosima avoided Delphine's eyes and frowned to herself, the hard edges returning to her mien. "Yeah, well, numerous women sharing my face wasn't supposed to be a thing, either." Her eyes swept over Delphine's visage. "And even a pretty face can disguise the worst threats."

Delphine heaved a mental sigh. She'd let herself believe she and Cosima had come far enough in an understanding that suspicion had been laid aside. Yet, she couldn't help but think in hindsight, how like Cosima to take well-meaning advice as an inconvenient reminder.

Cosima's lips thinned. "I'm not coming out to Scott any time soon. So we're going to have to stick to tag numbers. 324B21 from here on out." Her eyes held Delphine's in brief contact. "Try not to slip up."

* 

The knock disturbed the tranquil cocoon of Shay's apartment where she lay curled around the comfort of a hot water bottle in a set of flannel pajamas and in the thrall of a funny YouTube video. The siege of cramps had come and gone the day before, but, pain or no, Shay liked the sensation of heat against the discomfort of the havoc and evacuation her innards underwent once a month with demoralizing regularity. (Good for tracking, reliably inconveniencing.) She debated not answering the knock or simply calling out to ascertain the identity of her visitor, but, like every other time she'd slipped into contemplating those options, she urged herself to her feet in lieu of rudeness.

When Shay opened the door, Cosima raised her head and gave a little start. Her eyes swept over Shay's sleepwear with an air of sheepish reassessment.

"Hey," Shay said, leaning on the edge of the door. She wasn't much surprised to discover her neighbor at the threshold.

Cosima stood less possessed of words. Also nowhere in evidence was a smile and, now that Shay was taking stock, the light of mild mischief Shay associated with Cosima's gaze lurked nowhere behind her lenses.

Unease shifted Shay upon her feet. "What's up? Is something wrong?"

The silence extended. Cosima's eyes maintained an uneasy, pinched study of Shay.

"Cosima?" Shay prodded.

"Do you and Delphine talk about me?"

Shay squelched the knee-jerk defensiveness that straightened her spine, but didn't fight the frown that seized her lips. "What? Did something happen? Did—did you get into a fight with Delphine?"

"Do you talk about me?" Cosima asked again.
A pulse began to beat dully in Shay's temple. "What is this about? What happened?"

"Shay," Cosima said, her voice soft and tired, "just tell me. Please."

Shay licked her lips and said, simply. "No." She gripped the door harder. "If you really want to know, Delphine avoids talking about you."

Cosima exhaled audibly through her nose. She looked lost. "Do you trust Delphine?"

Shay shook her head slowly. "Cosima, what is this about? Did something happen at work?" Shay paused and considered. "Is it something you can't talk about?"

"Is that what Delphine tells you?" Cosima countered. "That she can't talk about it?"

Shay cocked her head. "What Delphine tells me is between me and Delphine."

"And you believe what she tells you? You trust her?"

Shay's eyes narrowed as she tried to determine the thrust of this interrogation. "I have no reason not to."

"And Delphine trusts you?"

Shay looked away for a second to take a breath and a mental step back. "Cosima, I'm not going to have this conversation with you without knowing what it's about."

Cosima stood quiet for a moment. "If you knew that Delphine had put herself in a bad position, would you try to help her? Protect her?"

"I don't even know what that means," Shay said, exasperated. "Look, I know next to nothing about Delphine's work—your work. I know better than to ask. If something happened and you want me to . . . approach Delphine about it, I can . . ." Shay shook her head, "try. But I don't know what you're asking me or what it is you think I know—or don't know." A tempered breath calmed and slowed her tone. "I can tell you that Delphine's my friend. That she's always kept her word to me. And that she's been kind. And considerate. I don't know what else to say."

Cosima's jaw worked as she studied Shay with an intensity that made Shay resist squirming.

"You really have no idea what she does," Cosima said and Shay couldn't discern if it was a question or a statement.

"I don't need to know," Shay said, the conviction absolute in the moment. "It's never made a difference."

Cosima's only visible reaction was a slight narrowing of her eyes. "You genuinely think of her as your friend."

Shay loosed a gasp of a laugh. "Yes." She brushed at her brow with her fingertips. "What—Cosima, just . . . tell me what happened that you're asking all of this."

Cosima backed away a step, shaking her head, withdrawn, bewildered. "Nothing happened." She swallowed, gaze unfocused. "I should—I have to go."

Shay watched Cosima whirl and retreat. Cosima's name lay on her tongue, but Shay couldn't bring herself to call out. She had no idea what had transpired—between Cosima and Delphine, between Cosima and herself—but doubted that she could find the words to coax out the narrative. Not in the
face of Cosima's reluctance.

Not in the face of her own.

The package lay innocuous in Delphine's mailbox. It was scarcely larger than a standard letter envelope. Delphine picked it up and turned it over. There was no address, no postage, no marking whatsoever. It felt to be all bubble packaging. Delphine opened it standing there in the lobby and peered into the depths. Inside she discerned a thin card and an oblong object nestled at the bottom.

Delphine fished out the item. It was a plain USB memory stick. Delphine drew out the card. In the center of the heavy cardstock, in the neat typography of a printer, it said, "As requested. For your eyes only."

Delphine inhaled sharply.

Marion Bowles.

Delphine spent a stymied minute devising scenarios detailing how the package had arrived in her mailbox without name or address. She backtracked to the doorman and asked if anyone had given him a package meant for her. He answered in the negative, confirming Delphine's suspicion—if someone had tried to give her a package via any of the doormen, they'd have held onto the package to hand to her directly. Which eliminated that pathway but went no further to explain how she was holding the delivery in her hand. She thanked the doorman and wished him good night in a cloud of absentmindedness, brooding on the package.

What if it wasn't from Marion Bowles?

What if the memory stick contained a virus or spyware? Could Aldous or someone else have tracked her movements? Was Marion Bowles trying to gain access to Delphine's hard drive?

The train of thought stopped Delphine in the midst of opening her apartment door.

Was she being too paranoid? Was she living in fictional fantasies?

Was it possible to be too paranoid about an unmarked, unlabeled device planted for her to find?

Was Cosima getting to her?

Delphine bit her lower lip. Indecision gnawed at her. When she opened the door, her mind settled on a course of action. She deposited her mail and the package onto the foyer side table, stowed her dinner in the refrigerator, and ventured back out. A quick search directed her to an electronics store still open. A salesclerk helped her choose a cheap notebook.

Maybe this was too paranoid.

The notebook underwent its initial boot up while Delphine munched on a salad of mixed greens and contemplated the unremarkable USB memory stick. She let the notebook have access to her Wi-Fi while it downloaded updates and exchanged the day's work outfit for cotton and fleece. Killing time until the restart concluded, Delphine engaged in cautious stretches of her hip and shoulder, grimacing against the stiffness and resistance.

She really did need to stretch regularly.
When the notebook was ready, stock wallpaper welcoming her with its bland unthreatening textures, Delphine disabled the Wi-Fi connection. She stared at the icon, decided she'd already come this far, and erased her Wi-Fi's profile. The memory stick was practically weightless. The cover slid off without complaint. Delphine stared at it.

She plugged it in.

A password prompt popped up.

Delphine frowned. She picked up the accompanying card. She saw nothing resembling a password. Holding the card up to the light revealed no hidden or embedded messages. She ran her hand over the surface and encountered no aberrations or indentations. A recheck of the package yielded no other clues. Only this: As requested. For your eyes only.

Delphine stared sullenly at the prompt.


The prompt remained stubbornly on the screen, the blank white window waiting expectant.

Delphine frowned, chin in hand.

The password had to be knowledge within her possession. Something that Marion Bowles knew she knew. Otherwise the password would have been given to her.

Delphine tried her birthdate. In several arrangements. The prompt reset, erasing each effort. For her eyes only.

She imagined herself in Marion Bowles's position. Solicited for classified information. Passing it onto . . . a subordinate. In secret. Delphine envisioned Cosima requesting the information. What shared knowledge would Delphine use as an obvious password?

Cosima's tag number.

But Delphine didn't have a tag number. With some trepidation, she input her numéro de sécurité sociale. Nothing. She tried her passport identification number. Nothing. With growing frustration, she tried the one on her driver's license.

Delphine frowned at the screen. She'd achieved nothing beyond acquainting herself with the myriad strings of numbers through which institutions and bureaucracies reduced her existence. At the most, Delphine was coming to see that Marion Bowles wasn't versed in the minute details of her profile, or saw no need to flaunt the extent to which Delphine's life was transparent, or that Dr. Bowles had vastly overestimated her abilities as a sleuth. Delphine gripped her head between her hands. Why was nothing simple at the DYAD?

Delphine raised her head.

The DYAD.

Delphine stood up and fetched her DYAD security badge from where it was still clipped to the belt loop in her pants. Bearing it in hand, she sat before the notebook and punched in her employee number.
With a tap of the enter key, files populated the folder with the instantaneity of magic.

Triumph eked out a grin.

Delphine scrolled through the list. It was all there. As requested. A wealth of names and tag numbers and medical profiles and treatment histories. A vast number of them. The elation faded. There were so many more than Delphine had anticipated. A cold sweat broke out across her skin.

Delphine sat back.

This was what Aldous had known.

That she didn't want to know this. How extensive the problem was. How widespread.

But now she knew.

Delphine covered her mouth with a hand.

Her phone beeped. Hesitation held Delphine back for a second. She imagined eyes peering through her windows. Her skin crawled.

She was being paranoid.

Delphine checked her phone.

From Shay [23:03]: Did u and Cosima have a fight today?
From Shay [23:03]: Something strange just happened.

Delphine frowned.

To Shay [23:03]: What happened?
To Shay [23:03]: Are you OK?
From Shay [23:04]: I'm fine.
From Shay [23:04]: I'm not sure Cosima is.
From Shay [23:04]: She came over and started asking lots of questions.

Delphine's frown did not abate. She studied Shay's words. Then she pressed the call button.

"Hey," Shay answered, surprise clear in her tone.

"Hey," Delphine replied. "Are you okay?"

"Yeah, I told you, I'm fine," Shay said, sounding exasperated, but hale and whole. "It's Cosima I'm worried about. You and Cosima."

"What did Cosima ask you?" Delphine prompted.

Shay was quiet for a disconcerting stretch. At last, she said, "Lots of things that made me worry about you guys. She seemed... not just upset, but, like... like I wasn't giving her the answers she wanted to hear."

In a gentler tone, Delphine tried again. "What did she ask?"

Shay sighed loudly into the microphone. "Look, I don't want to be... stuck between the two of you." Shay sighed again more softly. "I shouldn't have said anything."
The weariness and regret in Shay's voice twisted Delphine's gut. She sucked at her lips. "Cosima and I didn't fight." She pressed fingertips to her lips. "Today was . . . stressful. There were . . . developments beyond our control. She and I—discussed how to address them. We did not exactly agree, but I wouldn't say we fought."

Silence emanated from Shay's end, until she said, "I'm not sure that's how Cosima saw it."

"I will talk to her tomorrow," Delphine reassured Shay. "Don't worry about it. Okay?"

Shay's silence rang as the subtle buzz of white noise in Delphine's ear. "Shay?"

"Yeah," Shay breathed.

Delphine hesitated. "Are you okay?"

"Yeah, yeah." Shay exhaled measuredly. Her tone assumed a forced lightness. "We don't usually talk like this."

"Over the phone? It is like when we talk in person," Delphine said, with an equal effort at levity. "I wanted to be able to hear your voice. How are you?"

"Tired," Shay said, sounding it. But she rushed to clarify, "It's my bedtime."

"Okay," Delphine said gently. "Sorry for calling."

"I didn't mean it that way," Shay said. "I meant—it's why I'm tired." The admission eased the tension in her voice and she asked more naturally, "How are you doing? Work didn't get you down?"

Delphine stared at the screen of the notebook. "No. I'm okay. It was a long day, yes, but I'm fine."

They were both quiet.

"I'll let you go," Delphine said. "Good night."

"Good night."

"Oh," Delphine said quickly. "Shay?"

"Yeah?"

"Thank you for saying something."

Uneasy silence emanated from the other end. "I'm not sure I should have."

"Maybe Cosima wanted you to," Delphine said on impulse.

"Why would she want that?"

Delphine leaned back in her chair, buried her free hand in her hair, and tilted her head back, gazing upward idly. "Maybe she needed you to send a message."

"To you? She can't tell you herself?" Shay paused. "Are you not listening to her?"

"I listen," Delphine insisted. She covered her eyes. "Things between me and Cosima are . . . complicated."

"I can believe that," Shay said. "I don't really do well with complicated."
Delphine frowned.

"What?" Shay prodded, teasing, when Delphine didn't reply. "No comment how that's obvious given the Zen thing?"

"The last thing I want is for you to be in the middle, Shay," Delphine said, sincere, but keen to curb the fervency of her tone.

"In the middle of what?"

Delphine shook her head. "I don't know."

It wasn't entirely a lie. Delphine lacked answers to the pertinent questions. What was Cosima's aim? Within the DYAD? Regarding Scott? By approaching Shay?

Shay sighed. "Alright. I'm turning in now. Good night."

Delphine nodded. "Good night."

She put her phone aside and sat a while, wondering what had happened. What Cosima might have said. Something strange and exceptional enough to spur Shay to reach out to Delphine. In concern. Out of worry. But not alarming enough that Shay was willing to divulge specifics.

The episode likely derived from the forced addition of Scott Smith.

Delphine rubbed at her eyes.

She understood Cosima's frustration. She did. But she didn't have time for that.

Delphine reengaged the notebook screen with grim attention.

Too much time was already lost.
Chapter 30

Chapter Notes

Thoughts simmering with additional catalogs of cases, the burden of the favor bequeathed to her by Marion Bowles, and the vague sense of a promise—or at least an assurance—made to Shay, Delphine sauntered into the lab in a cloud of sleep-deprived distraction and an inward-bound awareness borne on an assumption that the lab was empty.

It wasn't.

"Scott," Delphine named the occupant curtly as she came to an abrupt standstill. "You're here early."

From behind a computer monitor, Scott raised a hand in a meek wave. "Hi. Dr. Cormier." He shifted uneasily in his chair. "I didn't think this was early, but I'm not—well, I'm not . . . Cosima." He flashed an anxious, ephemeral smile. "Mornin'."

"Good morning," Delphine returned in subdued consideration. She processed the comparison as she set down bags and divested her coat. "I take it you're familiar with Cosima's . . . relationship to time?"

Scott shrugged. "It stopped being noticeable after about a week."

Delphine nodded. She understood. "Well. It is as you can see." She smiled. "Welcome."

Scott tried a smile. It wobbled without the confidence to sustain it.

"Like Dr. Leekie said yesterday," Delphine attempted to reassure him, "if you have questions, I will try to answer them."

"Actually," Scott said, pushing away from the desk. "I think there's something I need to show you."

With the help of front desk security, Delphine waylaid Cosima when she arrived on the DYAD premises and had her detained at the entrance. With an indistinct word to Scott, Delphine bustled out of the lab to rendezvous with Cosima, who greeted her with the stony silence of annoyance. The security guard shot Delphine a look that wished her good luck that Delphine barely parsed in her single-minded pursuit to direct Cosima to an unoccupied conference room.

"What's going on?" Cosima demanded on the way but Delphine shook her head tersely. Delphine closed the door behind them, then turned down the shades on every glass panel to deny access to any prying eyes. Cosima stood furrow-browed and bewildered by one of the empty chairs at the head of the long oblong conference table.

Their privacy circumscribed, Delphine didn't waste time.

"This is what Scott showed me this morning," Delphine said. From her lab pocket she withdrew and held up a pair of plates. Drawing one over the other slowly, she repeated Scott's demonstration, depicting the overlapping stoci. "Since we talked yesterday about how the stem cell line is likely proprietary, he wanted to see if the donor was tagged in the same manner as you and the other subjects. So he ran a PCR. But the samples did not contain any tags. The donor wasn't a clone. So
Scott checked for familial markers instead. And, as you can see . . . there is considerable overlap. Thirteen STR loci. The donor is likely related. To you. In the realm of, say . . . a daughter or a niece."

Cosima, watching closely, paled as Delphine approached the conclusion. She focused beyond the plates and met Delphine's eyes. Delphine nodded.

"Shit," Cosima said.

"Sarah has a daughter, yes?"

"Fuck," swore Cosima with feeling.

"You know what this means?" Delphine asked quietly.

Cosima spun away and flung her arms into the air, unimpeded by all the baggage she carried. Speaking slowly, as if still absorbing the full implications of the results, Cosima breathed, "It means we're fucked. It means that if we want to pursue the stem cell line as a treatment, we have to—to harvest teeth from Kira." Cosima placed her hands upon her head. "She's just a kid. She's Sarah's kid. Fuck! How the hell did Leekie get her teeth in the first place?"

Kira. Delphine hadn't known the child's name. Hearing it—learning it—gave Delphine pause, but it didn't dislodge the foremost issue in her mind. Maintaining focus, Delphine nodded and sidestepped the logistics of Aldous's reach. "That's . . . one option, yes."

Cosima whirled around. "What? What does that mean?"

"Incubating stem cells from her teeth may be effective in small bursts, but it's not a long-term countermeasure to the growths. It's a bandaid." Delphine crossed her arms. "Now that we know the source, we could pursue a more lasting solution: a bone marrow transplant."

Cosima covered her eyes with a hand, brows contracting. "Jesus, Delphine, the fact that we're taking her teeth isn't enough for you?"

Delphine peered at her evenly. "One bone marrow transplant versus plucking out all her baby teeth every, what? Month? Week? And then?"

Cosima shook her head. "Even a bone marrow transplant isn't a cure. You harvest her for me, then you harvest her for Jennifer, then for every other clone who gets sick? There's not enough of her to go around!" Cosima stared at Delphine, hard. "Besides, it's not our choice."

"I know," Delphine conceded quietly. "This explains why our resources are limited. It's not because the stem cell line is proprietary—it's that we don't have access to the donor."

"We don't have access to—" Cosima swallowed her outburst. "She's not some petri dish, Delphine. She's a seven-year-old kid."

"And you're dying," Delphine said quietly but firmly, "and we don't have many ways forward."

Cosima turned away, shaking her head. Delphine sighed.

"It's the better solution," Delphine reasoned. "But it's your choice, Cosima. It has to be. You know Sarah. You have a direct line of access where the DYAD doesn't."

"There's gotta be another way," Cosima muttered.
"Gene therapy, most likely," Delphine agreed. "But we are nowhere near compiling the data we need to create one. With your condition . . . knowing how rapidly it could deteriorate . . . we need to delay the advance and spread of the growths."

Cosima paced away from Delphine, circled back around to the table, and leaned against it. "I need to — I need to think."

Delphine raised a hand to cover her mouth but nodded.

Cosima shook her head. "When did Scott even find time to run the test?"

"Apparently," Delphine said from behind her hand, "he sent the samples to the lab before he left yesterday. Everything that comes from our lab is flagged to be rushed. The results came back early this morning."

Cosima pressed her fingers to her forehead and shook her head again.

"He's good," Delphine muttered.

"Shit."

Delphine concurred with the sentiment.

As they exited the conference room, Cosima turned to retrace their steps, but Delphine grasped Cosima's elbow in a gentle forestalling hold. Delphine drew back quickly when Cosima jerked around and explained, "We need to visit the medical wing."

"Why? I feel fine," Cosima said.

"Yes, but we're going to borrow an exam room so I can examine you in private. I think if Scott saw me drawing your blood, he would have questions."

"Ah, jeez," Cosima griped, shoulders slumping in exasperation. "I didn't even think about that."

Neither had Delphine until that morning as she sat in the lab, Scott quiet but present at a station, neither of them quite anticipating Cosima's arrival, but the lab waiting expectant for her presence, so that the realization punctured Delphine's complaisance: Scott's punctuality presented a potential conflict in conjunction with Cosima's tardiness.

"If needed," Delphine remarked as she led Cosima down the hall, "we can reserve a room for daily use. I'm not sure how regular a schedule we could maintain, however."

"You do know that if a room ends up being available only at eight o'clock in the morning, it's not going to happen, right?"

"I should hope," Delphine said mildly, "that you place enough value on your health that you would make an effort in that case."

"If you want to see my health deteriorate at the rate trapped ethylene gas ripens a banana in a paper bag," drawled Cosima, "go ahead and try to force me to come in at eight o'clock every morning."

Delphine smiled to herself and shook her head.

With Cosima perched on an exam table and silence filling the space between them to ostensibly
allow Delphine to focus on the examination, Delphine found Shay's concern disassociating from the morass of her thoughts with the hard substance of a solute crystallizing in a solvent. But Delphine saw no way to broach the subject with Cosima. Whatever drew Cosima to speak to Shay, both the night previous and any time before that, did not exist between Cosima and Delphine. For proof Delphine had to consult no farther than her own feelings and the relief that settled her nerves whenever hostility did not invade her interactions with Cosima. If it was solace or support Cosima needed, if that was what Cosima sought from Shay, Delphine wasn't in a position to offer either, not when she and Cosima stood on ideologically opposite sides of an argument that needed a solution—fast.

Delphine moistened her lips. "I know you need to deliberate before you make a decision, but I don't think it would be wise to delay."

Cosima glanced irritably into Delphine's eyes. "I'm dying, yeah, I get it. You don't have to remind me every two seconds."

Delphine steadied her response with a measured breath. "I mean that whatever path you decide to pursue, there will be logistics to work out."

Cosima cocked her head. "Yeah, about that. How do you propose extracting her bone marrow? Are you thinking about bringing Kira here to perform the procedure? Because I can tell you that her mom will never go for it."

Delphine shook her head slightly. "I don't know. Perhaps we can agree upon a third party to perform the procedure and we can process the material ourselves." Delphine wasn't sure she wanted to go through Aldous. Her other recourse might be Marion Bowles, but that route was even more shrouded—and fraught. To turn to Marion Bowles would be to expose their dealings.

Cosima studied Delphine in their proximity. "Would you be willing to work with me outside of the DYAD? If I said I'd be willing to pursue this course and Sarah agreed to let Kira be a donor and we could work out our own arrangements, would you be willing to help us?"

Delphine frowned. "You would... leave the DYAD?"

Cosima offered a small shrug.

"But you would have to abandon all their resources, all their data."

"Technically," Cosima said with a slight falter, "it kinda belongs to us since it's our biology."

"You would steal it?" Delphine clarified.

"Again," Cosima said mildly, "it's our property."

"A bone marrow transplant is not a cure," Delphine said softly. "It may very well reboot your immune system, but you'd be taking a great risk to abandon the resources of the DYAD."

"That doesn't answer my question."

Delphine inhaled and exhaled. "I don't know."

Cosima nodded slowly. "I get it."

Delphine's brow furrowed. "You do?"
"We can't pay you," Cosima allowed. "And there's a good chance that DYAD would hunt you down."

Delphine almost laughed. "That's true."

Cosima passed her gaze across Delphine's. "But that wasn't what you were thinking?"

Delphine fell quiet to measure Cosima's blood pressure. Removing the sleeve and withdrawing, she said, "It's not just you, Cosima." Delphine met her eyes. "How do you plan to help the others? How would you synthesize enough material to administer to them? How would you get it to them? How would you find them?"

One side of Cosima's mouth pulled to the side in amusement. "Is that what you plan to do? Help every single one of us?"

"Do you think that helping you alone would be enough?"

"I didn't say that," Cosima said with unaffected placidity. "It just occurred to me that wanting to help all of us sounded pretty ambitious for someone who told me that she couldn't guarantee my safety or my friend's safety or her own safety."

Delphine's mouth thinned into a line.

"So I'm sitting here wondering, 'How would she help everyone?'' Cosima said.

Delphine turned away, to take up a rubber tie.

"There is a way, isn't there?" Cosima asked lightly, almost gently.

Delphine almost fumbled the syringe. Did Cosima know about Marion Bowles?

"At least," Cosima continued, "you'd be a hotter Leekie."

Delphine's head snapped up.

Cosima raised an eyebrow at Delphine's expression. "Is that not the plan?"

"I don't want to be Leekie," Delphine said simply, adopting the moniker and tone in which Cosima referred to Aldous that invoked his capacity as director of Project Leda with all it entailed.

"So you've got a different plan?" Cosima asked.

Delphine shook her head to ward off further questions.

Marion Bowles had talked around the same idea.

Was that the only way? Was that the path Delphine had set her trajectory?

Cosima looked at her and her eyes seemed to say yes.

Maybe the day was for truths no one wanted to hear.

Shay baked a batch of chocolate chip cookies. The plan manifested around lunchtime and required no more than determination and a detour to the store on her way home to pick up necessaries that
Shay didn't keep regularly stocked. Chocolate chip cookies were simple. Chocolate chip cookies were in the range of Shay's confidence—given that baking wasn't Shay's strong suit in the kitchen.

She considered herself a good juicer, a good steeper, a daring blender, and a serviceable cook, but baking, for all that Shay could follow directions, could wind up time-consuming. It required mindfulness, not only in tracking ingredients and making measurements and adhering to a step-by-step process that might require the application of various methods, but even the baking itself demanded attention, where windows of time were provided as approximate suggestions. Too little time in the oven resulted in underbaked pockets of mush. Too much time and the contents could come out burned or dry and beyond salvaging. Baking was a regimented endeavor and it could be unforgiving of mistakes.

Shay once heard the mindfulness required of baking likened to the mindfulness fostered in yoga, but the connection eluded Shay. When Shay moved through poses, her thoughts slowed, her focus narrowed, consciousness reduced to the measures of her breaths, the balance of her body, the strain and stretch and limit of every muscle. She ceded to the mechanical familiarity of each movement and escaped into the physical feedback of every sensation to the exclusion of all else. In contrast, baking hadn't acquired that state of inattentiveness for Shay. She simply didn't bake enough not to be overly fixated on completing each step or on the state of the goods in the oven or to succumb to a lapse of awareness that forgot there were items in the oven altogether.

Maybe the key to relaxation in baking could be Shay's if she or those around her craved cookies or varieties of breads more often, but they weren't a staple of Shay's pantry. Cravings for bakery goods usually accosted her during market runs, where impulse could sweep ready-made, no-hassle items off the shelf. But circumstances demanded an extra touch. Shay wrapped a dozen of her amateur efforts —after they'd sufficiently cooled, to spare herself a heap of split cookies she'd have to eat—in cheerful red-tinted cellophane, tied off the package with white ribbon, and attached a note that simply read "From Shay :)".

It was early in the afternoon, too early for Cosima to be home from work (presuming she'd gone to work, but Shay could see no reason she wouldn't have, unless the previous night's conversation originated from tremors of unease buried far deeper than Shay estimated), but this was according to design. Upstairs Shay conveyed the cookies, in a cheery small tote, to wait deposited in front of Cosima's door.

The cookies weren't a peace offering. They were a neighborly gesture. An invitation. An indication that whatever had passed the night before, Shay was still in unit #2, available and accessible—possibly nibbling on a cookie. A . . . decent cookie. These weren't Shay's best effort. It wasn't her favorite recipe. The one she liked more required chilling the dough, but that would have taken more time to prepare—and Cosima wouldn't know the difference. Though maybe since she now had a bulk of the ingredients on hand, Shay could whip up the other cookies. Maybe Delphine might like some.

Did Delphine like chocolate chip cookies? Shay had no idea. Which, in the moment it occurred to Shay, seemed like a ludicrous thought. Who didn't like cookies? But though she and Delphine had shared countless desserts, Shay couldn't recall a single instance of Delphine eating a cookie. Of any variety.

It was an insignificant detail. Whether or not Delphine liked cookies. But until that moment Shay hadn't been aware of the gap in her knowledge. There was a multitude of details big and small Shay knew she didn't know about Delphine, things she refrained from asking or things she hadn't yet asked, things she couldn't ask about or things she'd tried asking and was rebuffed, but this was a different category. This was something Shay hadn't known she hadn't known. This was the realm of
Cosima's insinuations, that there lurked facets to Delphine Shay couldn't see or was unwilling to entertain—because they were duplicitous.

Cosima's talk didn't bother Shay.

It didn't.

Shay was well aware she didn't know Delphine in some of the most basic of ways—like what exactly Delphine did for work, if she enjoyed chocolate chip cookies—but none of that marred what Shay felt she did know and appreciate: that Delphine was a woman capable of kindness, consideration, humor, conviction, care.

Impressions Cosima seemed determined to debunk.

Shay wished she could understand Cosima's leading questions. Maybe she could have teased out a motive if Cosima were mean, unconfident, jealous, or arrogant—but she wasn't. Cosima was funny, curious, mischievous, clever, perceptive. With Cosima Shay felt an ease of interaction that, if Shay were honest, she didn't always feel with Delphine. Delphine could be . . . intimidating, distant, challenging to read, difficult to reach. Cosima radiated a warmth of openness that invited and cooperated.

Unless the topic was Delphine.

Then again, Delphine's behavior regarding discussion of Cosima reflected the differences in the two women's personalities. If Cosima probed and pressed for information about Delphine, Delphine avoided and evaded attempts to examine Cosima.

Shay'd meant it when she told Delphine she didn't want to be stuck in the middle between Delphine and Cosima. But Shay knew the disorientation and loneliness of relocation. She'd sensed it in Delphine over the course of their sessions. She hazarded she could see it surface in Cosima's otherwise energetic aura. If not those precise sentiments, then . . . something.

How could Shay welcome the presence of one but ignore the other?

Evening arrived and nothing transpired. Evening deepened and not even a missive disturbed the night.

Shay wasn't sure what she expected or what she felt. Mild disappointment? It wasn't too much to expect an acknowledgement, was it? A little laugh of self-rebuke bubbled up in Shay. She didn't know if Cosima had returned yet. Or if she were tired. Or sad. Or maybe didn't like cookies.

(Shay could admit that maybe stereotypes had influenced her choice to bake cookies. What pothead wouldn't enjoy cookies?)

Feeling silly, a lighter heart buoyed Shay through the transition to bedtime readiness.

The knock caught Shay in the middle of brushing her teeth. She didn't hear the first volley over the furious sweep of the bristles crowding her ears. The second barrage fell harder and louder. Shay paused, then rushed through the rest of the chore.

"Coming!" she called out after a hasty rinse.

On the other side of the door Cosima stood leaning on the doorframe, a very familiar tote dangling from one hand. Shay's heart dipped with a twinge of sadness.
"Hey," Cosima said.

"You don't like chocolate chip cookies?" Shay asked.

The cheerfulness of Cosima's features contracted with confusion. "What? No. These are for you."

Cosima lifted the bag. Shay leaned down to peer into the depths, confused until her eyes distinguished the dark brown rectangular shapes crowding the bottom.

"They're exactly what you think they are," Cosima said, tone lifting with a jollity that raised Shay's guard.

"Cosima . . ."

"That's right, brownies." Cosima flashed a wicked grin. In that small window, Shay attempted to measure and temper a response. Cosima's grin widened in Shay's hesitation. "Yup, perfectly normal, unaltered, out-of-the-box brownies."

Shay reevaluated. "Really?"

Cosima straightened up, holding out the tote. "I wouldn't lie about that. I'm all for responsible, consenting drug use." She gave the bag a little bounce with a flick of her wrist. "Even if you don't believe me about the brownies—or if you're not into brownies—at least take your bag back."

Shay accepted the proffered article and fell back on the reassurance of polite manners. "Thank you."

Cosima's lips pulled in a lopsided smile. "I like your cookies. Did you make them today? From scratch?"

Shay fended off embarrassment with a little puff of laughter. "Yeah. I got home early and had some time—it wasn't hard. I pulled the recipe off the Internet. Did you really bake these brownies?"

Cosima cocked her head. "You say that like you didn't expect me to know how to turn on the oven."

Shay resisted batting at Cosima. "I meant that you probably didn't have much time to bake them."

"Oh, those are basically straight out of the oven." Cosima shrugged. "They're Betty Crocker. They required only a little measuring and mixing and like half an hour to bake. It was quick and they made my place smell amazing."

Belatedly, a little sheepish, Shay said, "Sorry about the assumption. I believe you." Amusement flashed in Cosima's gaze. Shay wet her lips. "I'd have one but I just brushed my teeth."

"A likely story," Cosima teased.

"It's eleven o'clock," Shay said, deadpan. "For some of us, that is pretty likely."

Cosima's gaze considered Shay's mouth. "Yeah? I guess that's why you have a little—" Cosima dabbed at the corner of her own mouth to demonstrate.

Shay reached up with reflexive haste to swipe at the unseen blemish.

"No, it's—" Cosima leaned forward, reaching out. The tips of her index and middle fingers alighted lightly upon Shay's skin and, exerting pressure, swept across Shay's cheek.

It happened in the second after Cosima's gaze darted up to briefly meet Shay's, intent and question
broadcast in a flash, enough for Shay's mind to recognize and react where computation and comprehension lagged.

Cosima's lips pressed against Shay's, the barest contact, brief and fleeting, as Shay leaned back, retracting, retreating, free hand rising to grasp Cosima's elbow for counterbalance.

(Cosima's lips were slickened with a sheen of gloss, soft, leaving a residue that Shay felt faintly clinging to her unadorned mouth.)

Cosima pulled back, not out of Shay's space or beyond the extension of Shay's hold, but with the restraint of gentle inquiry, her eyes searching Shay's.

"Cosima," Shay breathed, grasping at verbalization, adrift in a tumult of confusion and panic, suspended between instincts of flight and a flash pan spark of arousal. "I . . . I'm not looking for a relationship."

Cosima's lips jerked into a cautious, ephemeral smile. "Yeah? Neither am I."

Shay shook her head. "No, I mean . . . I'm not sure that if anything happened between us right now if it would be anything more than sex."

Cosima's gaze parsed Shay's lips. "I'm okay with that."

For a second, the offer tempted.

It had been . . . a long time now. Since Shay had curled companionship around herself like a comfort into which to surrender and explore. Since Shay had found anyone even half appealing and magnetic enough to consider broaching the possibility. And Cosima was more than half. Shay could let herself believe in Cosima's consent and conviction of detachment. In the sure knowledge of Cosima's availability and attraction and interest. Knowing that Cosima's body would be soft and warm and pliant in all the ways welcome and pleasing, from the way Shay could drag her fingertips along the tattoos on Cosima's forearms, to the curves of her waist and hips where Shay could fit her hands, to the definition of the thighs always displayed by the clinging form of Cosima's preferred dresses. Reading in the alloy of confidence and mischief that constituted Cosima's smile and bright gaze that Cosima knew exactly what she wanted and how she wanted it and how she would achieve it—and Shay had little doubt every bit of it would be enjoyable.

But Shay knew herself.

This was the fruit dangling out of the reach of Tantalus. It was delusion to think she could have a taste and not yearn for more.

Shay knew who lost in that equation.

"I'm not," Shay said, in a near whisper.

Cosima raised her eyes.

Shay released her hold of Cosima's elbow.

"I . . . I think you're an amazing person," Shay managed, "but . . . trying to keep things casual never ends well. For me."

Cosima studied Shay. "Is it because of Delphine?"
"What?" Shay gasped. Her heart skipped a beat, leapt into her throat, and sent ice rushing to the tips of her fingers and toes. Her thoughts tangled in a jumble, panic pivoting in a different direction, incredulity leaping from the fray to the forefront of defense.

Cosima eyed her skeptically. "Because if there's anything that's not going to end well—"

"No!" Shay snapped. She stepped back, away, as if distance from Cosima represented distance from the notion of Cosima's inference. Indignation frothed Shay's blood into a hot, furious current. Ire shielded her from her own disarray of thoughts. "It's not like that."

"Shay . . ." tried Cosima, plaintive, as if appealing—to reason, to fact.

Shay shook her head, focus frayed, and muttered, "No." She locked eyes with Cosima. Cosima took a small step back, startlement clear. "I think you need to leave now."

"Shay—"

"No," Shay said simply, stepping back, reaching for the door, and shutting it in one smooth motion. Cosima jerked back just in time not to catch a glass panel in the face.

Shay closed her eyes and covered her mouth with a hand, her other hand pressed against the door as if to fortify it against any attempts of intrusion. On the other side of the door Cosima lingered. Shay could sense her. Then Shay heard footsteps retreating.

Shay stood there for some time, unmoving, concentrating on her breaths—in, hold, out—until the tremors in her muscles subsided. Opening her eyes, she dragged her hand down her throat, fingertips curling onto the ledge of her collarbone. In a daze she looked about her apartment, aimless, as if she'd been transported into a foreign space.

She just had to sleep. There was nothing to do but sleep.

The mattress dipped beneath her weight in the expectation of her shape and the blankets piled atop her in the same arrangement as they ever had, but it felt odd, as if her nerves strained through some invisible medium to detect the texture and warmth. Or maybe it was Shay, sunken into the shell of her body. Out of touch.

Shay lay in bed.

(The impression of Cosima's lips upon hers lost.)


(The shape of Cosima's words ringing in her ears.)

As if she'd been overstretched upon a frame. Sleep stole over her and fled in fits. In dreams she tried to sleep. Or maybe she wasn't asleep at all. Morning crashed into her consciousness with the sudden, jarring blare of her alarm.

The face in the bathroom mirror peered back waxy and bruised. The meditative breathing exercises stuttered and muddled through meandering counts. The blouse slipped on back to front.

It was going to be a long day. A long day of not thinking about the night before. What Cosima did. What Cosima said. What Cosima saw. What Cosima thought.

What it meant. What it didn't.
Shay nearly tripped in her gambit at self-deception one step out of the door—and into the tote that had been dropped, unnoticed, and forgotten all through the night.

Chapter End Notes

I know I over-edited parts of this chapter but I didn't know how to un-over-edit it, so now we're all stuck with it. :(
Cosima was quiet, which wasn't remarkable in itself, but paired with the general manner in which Cosima avoided peering in her direction during verbal exchanges and the occasional intense study of her that Cosima conducted when Cosima thought Delphine wasn't looking, raised low-level alarms in Delphine's head. Or perhaps that was an indication that Delphine's paranoia was soaring to new heights. Before she'd embarked on an evening-long deep dive through the files she'd been given, Delphine had issued a brief, perfunctory thank you to Marion Bowles via the consultant's secretary and now she expected suited men to suddenly appear or Marion Bowles herself to stroll through the laboratory door, security measures like the access code rendered afterthoughts of inconvenience to a woman of her status and means.

In a way, Delphine hoped a rendezvous would occur. Soon. With or without warning. She preferred that—marginally—to wondering without clue as to what her proactiveness—impertinence, if Delphine channeled Aldous's likely ire—would cost her.

It would cost her.

The question was what Marion Bowles could possibly want from her, now or in the future.

At lunchtime she and Cosima declined an invitation from Scott to eat lunch together. It was coordination they'd prearranged earlier via text messages, but even so Delphine felt a twinge of pity when their twin declinations landed upon Scott's shoulders. They waited until he exited, then made their way to the medical bay after a brief deliberation about whether or not they should risk remaining in the lab.

"This should be a quickie," Cosima said, extrapolating how long a perfunctory examination should take.

"He may return sooner than we anticipate," Delphine pointed out.

Cosima graced Delphine with a look. "Alright, Dr. Cormier, you want absolute peace of mind to work your magic. Noted."

Once the examination was underway, gently inspecting Cosima's lymph nodes with her fingertips, Delphine remarked, "Yesterday's numbers looked good."

Cosima was quiet for a beat, then said, "I talked to Sarah."

Delphine froze before nodding. "What did you tell her?"

Cosima shrugged. "I told her that Leekie must have gotten hold of Kira's tooth somehow, that he'd developed a stem cell line—a treatment—that might work, that if that's true . . . that if we want to develop more dosages, we're going to need Kira's participation."

Delphine measured Cosima's words. "Did you tell her about the potential in a blood marrow transplant?"

"Dude, look, she was pretty upset just by the mention of Kira and DYAD in the same sentence—I wasn't going to drop the whole mountain in her lap at once."

Delphine raised an eyebrow. "So you didn't reach a decision?"
"They need time to consider it," Cosima said.

Delphine felt the tug of a frown. Cosima saw the twitch at the corner of her mouth.

"She knows we're on a timetable," Cosima said, tetchy, "but this is her kid we're talking about. And, you know, right now it's not like I can tell her with conviction whether this is working or not. It's been only a few days and we're not seeing significant bumps yet."

Delphine nodded and swabbed Cosima's arm in preparation to draw blood.

Cosima stared hard into Delphine's face. The same stare she'd been giving Delphine all morning.
"Do you know why he chose you?"

"Leekie."

Delphine's movements slowed. "Why he chose me for what?"

"To be my monitor."

Delphine moistened her lips. "You seem to have an idea."

Cosima coolly appraised her. "I want to know what you think."

"It doesn't matter what I think," Delphine said softly, focused on tying off Cosima's bicep. "It is what it is. I am your monitor."

"Then why have you kept your distance?"

"Why have I kept my distance?" Delphine echoed with an incredulous laugh. "You are the one that has kept me at a distance. You've made it clear how you feel about my presence."

"Yeah, but that probably wouldn't have stopped any other monitor from trying to get into my pants."

Delphine paused, needle poised above Cosima's arm, then pulled back a step. She didn't trust herself in just that moment to attempt stabbing at veins with the required degree of steadiness. She concentrated on the rhythm of her respiration.

Cosima studied her. "Did you really think you weren't a honeytrap?"

"I was never told to seduce you," Delphine said evenly.

Cosima cocked her head. "Did you have to be told? I got the impression you know what a monitor does. My ex was my monitor. What about . . . Jennifer? You ever meet hers? Did she have one? Let me guess: a significant other."

Delphine's jaw felt rigid with tension. "Aldous has no reason to think I could seduce a woman."

"Because his confidence was founded on your success with men?" Cosima asked. "Because you slept with him?"

The air buzzed in Delphine's ears. Cosima maintained placid observation in the ensuing silence.

They each let Delphine's lack of response confirm Cosima's assertion.
"You realize," Cosima drawled, "that the fact that you slept with him probably led him to believe you'd be willing to do anything to achieve your ambition."

"Is there a point to this?" Delphine asked, voice strained.

"Just trying to understand you."

Delphine stepped close again, composed, intent on the network of veins in Cosima's arm. "Even if I had been ordered to seduce you, you took every opportunity to disparage me and dissuade any effort of the sort."

"Because I knew from the moment I set eyes on you that you were a honeytrap designed for me." Further words were cut off as Cosima winced through the needle's penetration.

Delphine drew Cosima's blood in silence. Cosima's words provided explanations for some past behaviors. But why bring this up now?

"What do you want from me, Cosima?" Delphine asked in a hush as she relieved Cosima's arm of the rubber tie.

Cosima avoided Delphine's eyes and shook her head.

* * * * *

After an adjournment to the cafeteria to have lunch, passed mostly in silence and mutual projections of isolation but a necessary reprieve to help replenish Cosima's depleted plasma levels, Cosima said on the walk back to the lab, "You said Leekie didn't have a reason to think you're into women, but you didn't say if you were actually into women or not."

There was the brief shock of being addressed after the prolonged period of being ignored, but soon the substance of the question registered and confusion set in.

Unsure what kind of ground she was stepping onto, Delphine cautiously offered, "I never considered it."

Cosima snickered. "Seriously?"

"Yes. Is that surprising?"

"Yeah, I mean, considering—" Cosima cut herself off, features pinched in consternation. She seemed to hold an internal argument, then the muscles of her face relaxed into contemplative. "I thought you'd have had opportunity to consider it."

Delphine shook her head. "No woman ever made a pass at me."

"Okay," Cosima said around a laugh. "That might not be true. It's possible women hit on you but you didn't pick up the clues. But, like, you've never looked at a woman and . . . wondered?"

Delphine let the question pour through the bends and curves and pores of her thoughts in serious consideration. She remembered how casually Shay had revealed her sexuality, a test perhaps, or a hurdle to quickly overcome in the beginning of their acquaintance. Once declared, Delphine had simply accepted it as an aspect of Shay. She'd never really wondered how Shay had come to the conclusion that she was attracted to women. The question didn't interest Delphine much in general.

Except, perhaps, in the case of Cosima Niehaus and Project Leda. Studies done of twins attested to
the reality that genetically identical individuals weren't predetermined to express correlating sexual preferences, but the spectrum that the clones composed offered an opportunity to paint a far more nuanced picture altogether. Not necessarily a debunking of nature versus nurture, but an examination into the dance conducted between the two, the lines separating and the spillover between biological predisposition and choice.

Not a test Delphine had applied to herself.

Delphine shook her head. "No."

"Huh," harrumphed Cosima.

When she didn't elaborate, Delphine delicately asked, "Is that how you knew? You looked at a woman and . . . wondered?"

Cosima smirked. "You asking for my coming out story, Dr. Cormier?"

Delphine considered. She settled on, "No. But the way you say it makes it sound like that's what happens."

Cosima smiled tightly. "Yeah, well, sometimes you look at a woman and you don't know what hits you. You call it admiration and for a while that's enough—until you start questioning if that's how everyone feels—if that's all you feel. You just know you feel something, but you don't have the language, the—the framework to understand what you're feeling. You haven't heard the stories yet or watched the handful of movies with gay leads or seen the people living like that in real life. You don't know that there are girls who kiss girls. You don't have the definitions to tell you that's a thing you might be feeling."

Delphine absorbed the narrative. "Is that how it was for you?"

Cosima flashed her a grin. "Are you kidding me? I grew up in San Fran. My parents used to take me to Pride when I was in diapers. You know, to normalize it for me." She chuckled at Delphine's expression. "I knew from a pretty young age I wanted to try kissing girls. Then I did. And it was great."

Delphine walked in a silence of incredulity before simply shaking her head. "You are a brat."

"And you're a heterosexual?" Cosima countered. But Delphine heard the inflection that denied the words the declarative quality of a statement and rendered them instead a probing question.

Delphine shook her head. A dismissal. A chastisement.

They arrived at the lab. Delphine swiped her card against the keypad and opened the door grandly for Cosima, who stood looking at her expectantly. For confirmation. For denial.

But Scott called out, "Hey!"

Delphine smiled.

Scott continued to prove himself far more useful than she could have anticipated.

Shay got home and went for a run. She set out, slapped by the cold, like she might pace herself for distance, as if aiming for three miles or five could shake off the drowsiness of too little sleep and
work up enough heat to stave off numbness. She hit a groove, feet slapping the pavement in small steady strikes, until she began to push, each step reaching farther than the last in lengthening strides, the next one following faster. Then she ran like she was putting up a time for basic, racing against the milliseconds ticking at the speed of indiscernible on a stopwatch, against minimum requirements and minimum expectations, like the days of chasing after "improvement." She ran until her breaths came in sharp, heavy gasps that made more sedate pedestrians glance over, some with concern, their faces and attention flashes in Shay's peripheral vision.

But Shay was in her mind, buried deep, feeling the effort and ache of her muscles, the bead of sweat trickling down her skull, the pavement jarring up through the soles of her feet into her knees, resisting the curl of her tiring torso to bend her hunched over, snorting against the liquid drip of moisture in her nose.

She ran like she could leave behind the night before and all the days before it and their unchecked decisions that had led up to this flight, this desperate fleeing, as if she could shed all thoughts and feelings and become empty, *be* empty, and simply . . .

Present.

Shay ran until, abruptly, she couldn't run anymore.

She pulled up short, gulping air, limbs flailing in imitation of a ragdoll, slowing to a walk, head tilted back and hands resting on her hips to counteract the reflex to double over around the stitch in her side. A surprised incoming pedestrian into whose path Shay had stumbled in her disarray stutter-stepped around her. Shay attempted an apologetic look.

Her heart beat frantic and taxed in her chest. Her diaphragm pumped for air. Thirst coated her throat in a desert grip.

Such demands of her body were welcome distractions. Shay could focus on them, prioritize them, satisfy them. She toddled into a small convenience store and nabbed a can of coconut water, conscious she was a dripping, sweaty mess. Narcissistic self-consciousness. The cashier radiated disinterest.

The walk back was about a mile, the coda of a vague loop Shay had been attempting to circumscribe. (An orbit, she couldn't help but think, like in the model, the one in the museum, with Shay stuck in her prescribed arc, revolving and returning, unable to muster enough force to blast free.) Shay shook her head against the drift of her thoughts. The cold insinuated through her cooling sweat. She focused on the physical discomfort, shivering, and hurried her steps into a brisk walking clip to keep her muscles warm.

She had to reach home, where the temperature was comfortable, then she could be preoccupied with stretching, then a snack to replenish calories, then peeling off sweat-clinging clothes, then a shower, then—

All these tasks completed, Shay stood adrift beside her bed.

She did not want to be in company, which was why she had declined Alvin's invitation to grab drinks after work.

She was not tired, energized rather than exhausted by the run.

She did not feel like going out, not for sustenance, not for the anonymity, not for entertainment.

Shay wanted, if she were honest, to unplug from circumstances and simply *not be* for a while.
(No, if Shay were honest, she would acknowledge that she'd contemplated all of the above and the first recourse her mind had thrown up was seeking Delphine as collaborator and companion. It was a Friday night. It was a reflex.)

Shay retreated into baked ziti leftovers and Netflix.

What had Cosima seen, Shay wondered, attention slipping from the permutations of drama unfolding between the echelons of the upstairs and downstairs residents of Downton Abbey. What had Cosima discerned to make her think . . . ?

What had given Shay away?

The notion sank Shay's heart.

That her behavior spoke more loudly than her self-awareness. That what she'd considered a mild crush might, unacknowledged to herself, be more—thus more of an issue, more of a concern, more of a problem.

Was she pining for Delphine? Was that why she rejected Cosima?

Was it possible for Shay to pine when she was acutely rationally aware that she could not have Delphine in that way?

Shay exhaled long and heavily.

But if she was yearning for Delphine, if it were true on a level Shay herself had not let herself examine, then what would Shay do? What could she do?

The abyss tickled at the back of Shay's mind.

The chirp of her phone pulled her attention away from the shadow.

From Alex [9:37]: Hey. Making sure you have my itinerary. Sorry my flight gets in so early.
To Alex [9:37]: Yeah. No worries. It looks like u got a good price. I'll see u tomorrow.
From Alex [9:38]: Great. Take your time.

Shay contemplated her phone.

To Alex [9:38]: R u giving me permission to be late?
From Alex [9:38]: I understand the rules are more flexible in the civilian world.

Shay shook her head, feeling the tug of a smile.

To Alex [9:38]: I should make u wait just for that.
From Alex [9:39]: :
To Alex [9:39]: I'll see u tomorrow. Have a good flight.
From Alex [9:39]: OK. Thanks! Can't wait to see you. Good night.
To Alex [9:39]: Good night.

Shay lingered on Alex's name and eased into at least one conclusion: Delphine hadn't factored into her rejection of Cosima. Not in the way Cosima surmised. Not in that moment.

Shay glanced up and started the episode over again, determined to pay attention to ignore the other question.
When Delphine pulled into her assigned parking spot in the residential underground garage, she hadn't taken much note of the headlights trailing in the rearview mirror. Only when she disembarked from her car did she recognize it for the black town car, coasting to a stop in perpendicular behind her vehicle. Engine left running, headlights rendered extraneous by the overhead fluorescent lights, the tall, suited driver—the same from the previous summons, Eric, if Delphine remembered correctly—stepped out from behind the wheel. He crossed to the driver's side back door, opened it, and held it open in presumptuous expectation.

With a suppressed sigh, Delphine deposited her portable electronics back into her car and locked the vehicle.

This was, she supposed, what she wanted.

Delphine went around to the open door, pivoted to slide in, then stopped. Seated on the far side of the back seat was Marion Bowles. The woman regarded Delphine in cool assessment. When Delphine didn't budge, Dr. Bowles said, "Join me, Dr. Cormier."

Delphine glanced at Eric, but his face betrayed no judgment or opinion. Delphine lowered herself into the seat beside Dr. Bowles. Eric closed the door behind her sealing them into private conference. Delphine waited for him to reclaim his place in the front, but he stood outside the car, head sweeping left and right in surveillance.

Dr. Bowles smiled that opaque smile. "You didn't seem too surprised by our appearance."

Delphine mulled in a brief silence. "I was hoping to thank you in person, but lacked the means to meet with you. I concluded that you would come to see me when you deemed the time was right."

Dr. Bowles's smile acquired a hint of . . . something. Delphine would not have categorized it as warmth, but there was an unidentified emotion planted in the corner of her mouth. Amusement, perhaps. "I can see why Aldous took a shine to you."

Delphine checked any reflex expression or response. After a considered moment, she said, "Please allow me to thank you."

Dr. Bowles nodded. "I believe you will."

Delphine hesitated. She'd suspected nothing could come without a price, but Dr. Bowles laid out the expectation baldly. Delphine was in debt and the debt would be paid—in the future. Fine. Delphine had accrued the debt, she might as well plumb the credit to its limit. "What's happening to the others? What's being done for them?"

Dr. Bowles tilted her head to the side. "Some have been herded to our facilities for observation and treatment. Others have panicked and bolted. Such was the case with Katja Obinger."

Delphine absorbed Dr. Bowles's concise answer. "Treatments are being administered . . . without success?"

Dr. Bowles folded her hands upon her lap. "That's correct. For the most part. As you should now be familiar with." She read Delphine's expression. "If we had found a successful treatment, we would have disseminated it to all facilities. As it is, as you've seen in the medical reports, we hit upon stop-gap measures that have temporary efficacy—at best."

Delphine swallowed. "I saw that some of the subjects have passed."

Dr. Bowles nodded. "At worst, treatments are accelerating the autoimmune response or weakening
subjects to the point where their immune systems are critically compromised."

"But Jennifer was the first?" Delphine queried in a quiet voice.

Dr. Bowles effected a small shrug. "And has proven remarkably robust. Perhaps due to being so healthy to begin with."

Delphine sucked at her bottom lip. "Is there nothing we can do for Jennifer?"

Dr. Bowles's eyebrows lifted in the slightest jerk. "From where I stand, we're providing her all the care we can."

Delphine scanned Dr. Bowles's steady, unwavering gaze. "I meant in terms of treatment."

"You tell me, Dr. Cormier. Is that not the focus of your current assignment? I should be asking you what you're doing for Jennifer and the others."

Delphine took a sharp, truncated inhalation. "We are trying something. With Cosima."

Dr. Bowles nodded slowly. "Aldous's stem cell line. I got wind of that."

"It's limited," Delphine admitted hesitantly. "We have no means of mass production."

Dr. Bowles unlaced her hands and turned them palms up. "I'm not sure what you're asking me. It sounds like there are decisions you have to make."

"I understand that we're prioritizing Cosima," Delphine hedged.

Dr. Bowles's gaze sharpened. "You would rather not?"

Delphine proceeded carefully. "Jennifer's case is more urgent."

Dr. Bowles leaned back. "That's . . . true. In a sense. Some might see maximizing Cosima's value as being more urgent. Aldous certainly ascribes to this view. He seems to believe Cosima is a key to reaching Sarah. It's also entirely possible that he's developed a fondness for Cosima. It's easy to see in her the science prodigy he longed for but didn't get. I wouldn't be surprised. He does have a propensity to form attachments." Dr. Bowles suspended Delphine in her scrutiny. "Are you attached to Jennifer?"

"She is a patient," Delphine said vaguely. "I would like to know that everything that could be done for her was done."

"Attachments can be compromising," Dr. Bowles intoned. "For doctors in general, but particularly in this line of work. Do you agree?"

Delphine stewed in a lengthy silence. Dr. Bowles waited. At last, Delphine said, "They are an extraordinary achievement. The first of their kind. With the money and resources at the DYAD's disposal, shouldn't we strive to preserve them all?"

"Is there a point they become a drain on our resources?" Dr. Bowles asked.

Delphine's lips parted. She glanced briefly down at her lap, then raised her head. "Is there no official policy regarding our stance toward the care of the subjects? Dr. Leekie asked me similar questions in just this way, as hypotheticals, and even now I'm unclear if we are meant to be stewards, or if the subjects are to be tossed aside now that their viability is in doubt. I believe we are beyond the hypothetical. The subjects are dying now. Are we set to intervene in a dedicated effort or—or is the
failure of the group a foregone conclusion and the goal is to use what time we have to determine
where the failure lies? Are you—" Delphine wet her lips. "—improving the genome? Are the
subjects of Project Leda already obsolete?"

Dr. Bowles listened to her impassively. After a moment, Dr. Bowles nodded. It was undoubtedly
amusement that curled her mouth. "These are good questions to ask. Good questions to keep in
mind. But not concerns that should distract you from your directive. You are only one piece in this
effort, Dr. Cormier. The questions you ask lose sight of the fact that we have the means to pursue
multiple responses and objectives simultaneously. Which brings us back to my question: is there a
point at which Project Leda becomes a drain upon our resources?"

Delphine checked a frown. "I have heard parents say they are willing to do anything for the sake of
their children."

Dr. Bowles smiled. "To the point of bankruptcy and ruin? You believe that, Dr. Cormier?"

"No," Delphine admitted. "Not in every case. But I was hoping you would clarify whether or not the
DYAD regards the subjects as their children."

Dr. Bowles laughed, soft and short. "Do you want children?"

"I don't see how that's relevant."

"It could be," Dr. Bowles said, tone light. "You may very well discover lifelong dedication to ailing
subjects at odds with raising children."

"I wouldn't be alone, I hope."

"In which endeavor?"

"Both," Delphine said bluntly.

Dr. Bowles smiled. It was the widest and closest to unguarded that Delphine had yet seen. "You
speak well." Dr. Bowles took a breath and exhaled. "But now speak candidly. Tell me about this
stem cell line, where it came from, how you discovered it, your results, and what the plan is
regarding its development and use moving forward."

Delphine shook her head in a small, tight arc. "I cannot answer all those questions. I don't have the
answers."

"I'll take all the answers at your disposal."

"Why not ask Dr. Leekie?" Delphine posed. "He can answer all your questions."

Dr. Bowles reclined at her ease and cocked her head. "Because I'm asking you."

Delphine had no additional dodge at the ready and the gentle curve of Marion Bowles's mouth knew
it.
Chapter 32

When Alejandra Beltran leaned over to peer through the passenger window, mouth stretched in a grin beneath the mirror surfaces of her aviators, Shay knew with a sense of foregone resignation (and alternating currents of dread, anticipation, and anxiety) how the weekend would unfold. It ensued with a boisterously bellowed "Davydov!" when Alex whipped open the door and the casual, unconcerned arc of the duffel bag being slung unceremoniously into the backseat, the carriage ballooning with energy as Alex flung herself into the passenger seat, and then lunged over and slung an arm over Shay's shoulders in a one-armed hug, lips smooshing against Shay's cheek, the smell of her leather jacket wafting strong into Shay's nose.

"Why's it so damn cold up here?" exclaimed Alex with the full brunt of her enthusiasm.

"Because it's winter," Shay offered blandly, trying to right herself in the seat. "And you were just in New York. That's not exactly the Southern Hemisphere."

Alex laughed, slipping off her sunglasses and hooking them over her shirt collar. "Yeah, but it's colder up here! Don't try to tell me it's not." Her light brown eyes danced shrewdly over Shay's face and figure. "It's good to see you, Shay. It's been too long."

It had been a long time. A year. At least. Maybe two. Before Toronto.

"How was the flight?" Shay asked.

Alex threw her head back against the headrest, slapped a hand over her eyes, and unleashed a groan. "What passes for usual these days: one crying baby, one asshole who kept knocking his knee into my leg, and someone who wouldn't stop coughing. All of us are probably sick now."

Shay grinned to herself. "As long as it hits you after you leave."

Alex peeked out from under her hand. "What kind of bedside manner is that? Aren't you supposed to be Dr. Quinn, medicine woman, now?"

"No," Shay objected sharply. "I promote everyday balanced living, I don't cure colds."

"There's a lot more glory in curing colds," Alex remarked.

Shay rolled her eyes. "Yeah, and if you'd worn your uniform maybe the asshole would have thought twice about taking up space—we can't win 'em all. Are you hungry?"

"I could use some chow," Alex confirmed. She pushed back the wavy unconstrained mass of her chocolate hair and reached for the seat belt. "Then a shower, then maybe like a five-hour nap."

"What time did you get up?" Shay asked as she put the car into drive. "You didn't sleep on the plane?"

"Early. I had like four hours of sleep—I am not taking the trains to the airport next time. As for sleeping on the plane, you know how it is with me," Alex said. How it was: the tremors of the humming aircraft commuted through the soles of Alex's feet into the jittery bounce of a leg and transmuted into impatient—not nervous—restlessness wriggling and nestling into the whole of Alex's
Shay wasn't much surprised that a passenger seated beside Alex would have knocked knees with her. Alex tossed Shay a sly grin. "I can't wait to use your shower."

Shay shook her head and eased the car into traffic. "You mean because of my shampoos and scrubs? If you like them so much, you could buy your own. It's not like I make my own shampoos."

"It's not the same," Alex protested.

"Same as what?" Shay demanded. "The ones I use now aren't the ones I used years ago."

Alex shook her head to convey that Shay didn't get it and propped her elbow on the door to hold her head up. "What's for breakfast?"

"Huevos rancheros?" suggested Shay.

Alex chuckled to herself, eyes flickering over Shay's face. "Aw, man. It's good to see you, Davydov."

Sleep deprivation never seemed to touch Alex. Throughout breakfast, snarky, sharp-eyed ebullience radiated from the lines of her body and the snap of her words, the smile of hers as wicked as it ever had been in the dim light of a bar or the emptiness of a vacated barracks. This was what Shay had always thought of as the dark side of Alejandra Beltran, as in the unseen half of the moon, the part that disappeared deep down behind the impassive mask of the silent, unflinching steely-gazed soldier who stood rigid at attention in parade.

Over runny, salsa-drenched eggs Alex related the health and happenings of mutual acquaintances, or at least the names that still held significance for Shay, and circumscribed—in a relative, ambiguous, barebones account—her recent deployments, assignments, promotions, and prospects.

"What were you doing in New York?" Shay asked. "Are you assigned to a base around there now?"

Alex shook her head. "Nah. Just visiting friends."

Shay smiled behind a hand. "Still as restless as ever?"

Alex graced her with an arched brow. "Who are you trying to sound like, my mom? Settle down, find a nice man—"

Shay loosed a laugh. "You're out to her, aren't you?"

"Yeah, but . . . I think she still secretly holds out some hope. That I just need to meet the 'right' man."

Shay smirked. "I don't think you even want to meet the right woman."

"I am always open to meeting women," Alex declared, raising her glass of orange juice in salute or toast.

"I know," Shay said blandly. "How many did you meet in New York?"

Alex chuckled with good-natured glee but declined to provide an answer. Instead she made inquiries
into what it was like to put hands all over people for a living.

"Especially unsuspecting beautiful women," Alex remarked with an air of innocence.

"Stop," Shay warned her.

Alex smiled, but therein followed the tick. She snatched up a tortilla chip and, focusing on piling salsa onto its tip, asked, "Here you are ribbing me, but are you seeing anyone?"

"No." Shay considered Alex. "I didn't even ask if you were. Are you?"

Alex shook her head. Casual. "You know how it is."

How it was, the assumption on which Shay had operated: Alejandra Beltran wasn't one to be tied down.

The dark side of Alex was also the woman who stepped into Shay's apartment, assessed the studio in one measured scan, and gravitated toward the plate of brownies on the table. Alex considered them, fingered one, broke off the corner, and popped the chunk into her mouth. She chewed thoughtfully and nodded to herself when she swallowed. Shay watched her and felt a strange sensation witnessing a central figure from a chapter of the past bleed into the present, eating the brownies Shay herself had only contemplated with an inability to process and reconcile the associations. Alex eyed the bathtub for a second, but forewent even a comment in favor of a long, steaming, luxurious shower. She emerged in a cloud of botanical aromas, loose damp hair clinging to her neck in tendrils and wetting the shoulders of her tee, and summarily collapsed belly down onto Shay's bed.

She slept for three hours.

That was how the morning went.

Alex returned to consciousness smacking her lips in a bid to fill her mouth with moisture. The disturbance prompted Shay to put a bookmark in *Persuasion* and pad into the kitchen. She poured a glass of water and conveyed it to the bed, taking a seat next to Alex's prone form. Alex turned her head to gaze up at Shay sleepily. Shay held out the glass. Mouth pulling into a smile, Alex rolled over, reached up in a languid stretch, sat up, took the glass, and indulged in a deep drink. She shoved her hair back, grimacing when her fingers hit snarls, and ran her hand down her face.

"Bed's comfy," Alex assured Shay, giving the mattress a little bounce with her weight.

"Thanks. I'm impressed you could tell with the way you slept, but I'm glad it meets your approval."

"You know how it is, I don't ask for much." Alex twitched an eyebrow. "What's the plan for tonight?"

"You tell me," Shay countered.

Alex's forehead furrowed. "Why do you think I have a plan?"

"Because I don't have one."

Alex shook her head in disappointment, but slipped on a knowing smirk. "You're right, I have one."
Shay tossed up a hand in exasperation.

"But only because I knew you were going to be like this," Alex said.

"Because I knew you'd want to hit up the clubs," Shay said, "and, since I know you know me, I knew it was best to leave the research to you."

Alex surveyed Shay from head to toe. "Live a little, Davydov." Alex grinned. "At least you're prepared to go out. Right?"

Right.

That was how it was.

* *

The darkened interior. The pulse of the bass. The sheer din of noise. The heat of bodies in packed proximity. The sea of piqued eyes.

In a second the nightclub descended on Shay's senses. It had been some time.

Alex caught her elbow in a guiding but firm grip and steered Shay along when she faltered. The bar counter was the goal. Women who bothered to notice Alex's intent passage moved aside with glances that lingered on Shay's and Alex's faces and figures. Shay avoided eye contact. Of the many varieties of attention, the range of cool indifference to mild scrutiny to open assessment compounded overwhelmingly atop one another. (She'd forgotten this, too.) Shay concentrated on the point of contact between herself and Alex, the lead that pulled her through the throng, the easy confidence that could be read even in the lines of Alex's back. The attention rolled off Alex, like a great many things did. Alex was intent on the singular task of gaining the bar. She wasn't browsing. Yet.

The bartender caught Alex's eyes as they approached and moved to meet them. Once there Alex's hand disappeared upon Shay's arm as she leaned over the bar. Untended, Shay lifted her eyes and raked her gaze across the crowd.

Inhabiting that space with women like herself, Shay supposed she should have felt like she and Alex had come a long way. Maybe Alex had—though she'd never had far to go. But maybe Shay hadn't. She felt exposed, the presence of Alex heightening the effect, harkening back to the days when an outing like this would have been an illicit activity.

A tap on her shoulder. Shay turned. Beside her Alex displayed a fox's smile and two shot glasses filled with clear liquid. Shay had been prepared for this. This was why they'd taken a taxi.

Shay knew what the glasses contained.

"No!" Shay shouted over the music.

Alex leaned in close to be heard. "Just one! I'm on leave—and these are bought and paid for."

Shay sighed. "Fine," she hollered back. "But just this one. No more tequila!"

Alex grinned, put a shot glass in Shay's hand and her mouth close to Shay's ear, and tapped the two glasses together. "Deal."

It burned. It burned, cheap and high-proof, all the way down. Shay shut her eyes against the sting. When she opened them, Alex was watching her, the grin still there, and Shay reminded herself that
the present was a different time, that they were here without restrictions, that there were no threats of
discovery, that she was single, that she was available, that for tonight she didn't have to think about
offers unsettling and prospects out of reach, and that if anyone knew where her mind might be in this
moment, Alejandra Beltran was a good bet.

The dance floor beckoned Alex and Alex beckoned Shay.

With a deep breath, Shay followed.

* 

There was no more tequila, as promised. But there followed over the course of the night a lemon
drop, a rum and coke, a shot that a woman with an adorable pixie cut called a B-52, and a mojito that
Alex handed her at long last with a look of almost conciliation.

"You should have just gotten me a glass of water," Shay blasted into Alex's ear.

Alex smiled.

* 

Alex watched Shay.

As she ever had.

And as Shay ever had, she had no idea how that gaze could be so openly, appraisingly appreciative
and so reservedly, guardedly remote.

* 

Alex did not touch Shay in the club in any remarkable way. She didn't touch Shay in the car ride
back to Shay's apartment, the both of them quiet and separate in the backseat of the taxi they'd
flagged, the driver peeking at them with interest in the rearview mirror and trying to strike up small
talk. Alex didn't touch Shay when she passed over the last purchase of the night, a bottle of water,
lighter several gulps. She didn't touch Shay when they scooted out of the vehicle through the
passenger-side door, though she held the door open and shut it behind Shay.

Alex touched Shay in the hallway, when Shay stumbled as they approached the door, her hand
catching Shay's elbow, and there her hand stayed, steadying, as Shay fished and fumbled for the
keys. At the door, as Shay bent her head to the task, Alex's other hand lighted upon Shay's other
elbow. Shay's fingers stilled, muscles tautening. Alex stepped close, her body not a warmth but a
presence Shay's senses constructed from memory and imagination. A breath fell on the back of
Shay's neck. Shay closed her eyes. The slightest touch—the tip of Alex's nose—brushed aside the
curtain of Shay's hair, coasted butterfly light across the junction between Shay's neck and shoulder.

Anyone walking by would see. The awareness raised a memory. Alex telling her, the one time, the
only time: "My mom caught me. Making out. With another girl. In high school. She never said
anything. But from then on there was always this look in her eyes and she would . . . talk about all
the great boys in the neighborhood . . . or let me know she was praying for me. I had to get away. I
had to escape. This was my ticket out."

"This?" Shay had squeaked, voice small, so as not to be heard, and scared, of their reality and of the
threat of discovery.

In response Alex had kissed her. With easygoing confidence and self-assurance that Shay wanted so
badly to absorb and possess.

"Open the door, Davydov," Alex commanded in a whisper. A breath warmed the back of Shay's neck. "Okay?"

This was the moment to say no. Shay stood, eyes closed, configuring the sentences that would neutralize any scenario going forward. She felt the phantom of lips on hers, the denial she'd forced herself to accept. For so many things.

Shay opened her eyes and stared at the glass panel in which she could make out her reflection and Alex behind her.

Shay nodded.

They nearly tripped inside when Shay managed to open the door, Alex so close on her heels, hands taking firm grip, urging Shay to turn around. Alex's mouth found hers, sure and steady, soft, knowing. With barely a spared motion Alex flicked the door shut behind them, plunging them into twilight darkness, and crowded Shay toward the bed, as if she'd mapped out the floorplan exactly for this route, hands guiding and strong on Shay's hips, fingers slipping—warm, but her hands had always been warm even when Shay's tended to become icicles—between blouse and jeans, fingertips electric on Shay's bared skin.

Alex helped Shay out of coat, shoes, blouse, jeans, ditching articles of clothing of her own attire in between, unhurried but intent, palms pressing flat and appreciative across the planes of Shay's exposed body, while she kept Shay's mouth busy and occupied, like countless times before, and Shay tried to find the will to say no, as she knew she could, as she knew she'd had in the past, but it wasn't there beneath the ache in her limbs, the frustration in her gut, the loneliness in her heart, and the knowledge of what she knew Alex knew. She wanted to submit. She wanted her mind to turn off. She wanted to feel something. Physical. Present. Alex's fingers hooked beneath the band of her underwear and, lips brushing against Shay's, asked, "I didn't come at a bad time, did I?"

Shay shook her head. Alex had impeccable timing this month.

Shay was an old familiar instrument Alex was taking up again, was rediscovering—grinning when her fingers traced the ink on Shay's hip, gaze soft when she ran her thumb over the "vampire kiss" at the corner of Shay's mouth ("Vampire?" Shay had whispered when Alex first said it. "What, like a Lilliputian vampire?" "Mm. Un besito.")—and tuning into a heightened pitch, uttering soft assurances and praises into her ear and against her flesh, and all Shay was expected to do was respond and sing.

"No need to be so quiet," Alex breathed, nipping the words into Shay's throat. "It doesn't matter who hears."

That was how it was.

That was how it went.

In the stillness of morning, some things took on clarity.

"I know that look."

Shay glanced over at Alex from under the forearm she'd flung over her eyes. She hadn't noticed Alex had woken. In the diluted morning light Alex lay mused and sleepy, cheek pillowed on crossed
arms, toned shoulders exposed above the hem of sheets and blanket. Shay knew that look upon
Alex's features, but she refrained from commenting, just as she buried the remark that Alex was
probably all too familiar with her own expression from the final days of Shay's service.

"I have no regrets," Alex declared into Shay's silence.

Shay closed her eyes. "You never do."

"I never stopped caring for you, either," Alex added, undeterred. Shay left the declaration
unacknowledged and uncontested so that they lay in silence. Shay felt Alex's gaze on her. "You
were wound up, Davydov."

"It's been a stressful week."

"More than a week, I think," Alex said, implacable.

"If you mean it's been more than a week since I've had sex with someone, yeah," Shay said,
restraining the note of annoyance in her voice.

Alex was quiet. By degrees measured in breaths Shay relaxed.

"You seem happier, though," Alex said.

Shay laughed. "Happier than when? Happier than when I got out? Happier than before I moved to
Toronto?"

"Yeah," Alex agreed without clarification.

Shay shook her head, smiling to herself. "Those aren't very high bars to clear."

"Those are the only bars I've got," Alex said. "You look good, Davydov. Skinnier, but good. Still
one of the best sights on a dance floor. When you forget you're on it."

Shay scoffed. "Thanks."

"En serio," Alex said softly, invoking one of the few Spanish phrases she sprinkled in their
conversations in deft turns of jocular and earnest. There had been an explanation, once, in a haze of
sleepiness that Shay suspected had led Alex to forget the conversation had occurred. The words were
an echo of her mother, who employed it across all manners of occasions, to scold, to question, to
enforce, to express surprise and displeasure, a cascade of tones Alex had mimicked in fading
whispers.

Shay shifted her arm to rest upon her forehead and peeked at Alex again.

Alex's expression was placid, eyes intent. "I mean it when I say I still care about you."

Shay lay torn between a laugh and shaking her head and settled on a half-hearted indulgence of both
in combination.

"You know, it's different now," Alex continued. "We wouldn't have to hide."

Shay sucked at her lips and stared up at the ceiling. "That wasn't the problem." She shook her head.
"It was a problem, but it wasn't the problem."

It was Alex's turn to be quiet for a spell. "We could be different this time."
Shay turned her head and stared at Alex. "Fine. Let's think about it for a second. Let's say you're serious. How many years do you have left until your twenty? I'm supposed to, what? Play army wife? Relocate and dutifully wait to see you again between deployments? Maybe you'll knock me up and we'll have two-point-five kids and a white picket fence and then you'll—what, finally settle down?"

Alex gave her a hard-edged, close-lipped smile. "I'd take care of you."

Shay loosed a sharp laugh. "Like you took care of me when we served together?"

Alex's eyes narrowed. "That wasn't our arrangement then."

"That was the problem," Shay responded in a hushed voice.

A furrow of consternation marred Alex's brow. "You never asked for more."

Shay bit her lower lip and looked away. "I knew better than to ask."

"That's not fair," Alex countered, the first hint of heat entering her voice. "You can't put all the blame on me."

Shay exhaled in a gust. "I'm not putting all the blame on you."

"The situation was complicated," Alex reasoned.

Shay pressed the palms of her hands into her eyes. "Yes, it was."

"You got out, but I stayed in," Alex continued.

Shay relieved the pressure against her orbital sockets. "Because I couldn't handle it. And you couldn't handle that."

"Shay," Alex breathed, "you pushed everyone away. Not just me. You even stopped talking to Sean."

Shay lowered her arms and draped them across her middle. "Yeah, I did." She glanced at Alex. "And you did everything short of making a declaration to broadcast that you didn't want to be tied down. You never hid the fact that every willing woman was an opportunity to you."

Alex met her gaze squarely. After a moment, she nodded, frank, without shame or guilt. Simply herself. As she'd always been. "Yeah."

Shay shrugged. That was all there was to it.

Alex smiled, cautious. "But you ranked at the top of the list."

"I guess I should be flattered you came all this way for a glorified booty call," drawled Shay flippantly, aware that Alex's praise was just as tongue-in-cheek.

Alex grinned.

Shay rolled her eyes with a shake of her head. "I don't know how you didn't get caught."

"No one asked," Alex said blithely, "and I didn't tell." A keen spark lit her eyes. "I'm a good soldier. I do the job right and I keep my head down. If where I put my head down was between the legs of a woman—well, no one thought that was worth punishing."
Shay groaned at the joke, but the tension broke. Shay gazed off at the ceiling. "I wasn't a good soldier."

Alex lay quiet.

"Did you know I once tried to tell the CO that I'd gone on a date with a woman?" Shay smirked. "He cut me off and told me he was sure he hadn't heard a goddamn thing since I stepped into his office and if I knew what the hell was good for me I'd shut up, keep my head down, and do the rest of my time." Shay smirked at no one. "I couldn't even call myself a lesbian and I was trying to get kicked out as one." She forced her breaths into even intervals to suppress the knot expanding in her gut. "Why did you come here, Alex?"

Alex, who appeared to be absorbing Shay's confession, turned her head to rest her cheek upon her arm. "I wanted to see you. I missed you."

Shay studied Alex for a time. That was a sentimental declaration for the Beltran she knew. At last, she asked, "Did someone break your heart?"

The laugh overpowered Alex immediately. Alex buried her nose into her arm, stifling the giggles. When she calmed down, she said, "No."

Shay nodded. "This is why we would never work. I could never break your heart."

Alex's eyes narrowed in thought. "You want to be a heartbreaker?"

"No," Shay said softly, "but I would like to inspire that depth of emotion in someone."

"That's a dangerous game, Davydov," Alex said softly.

Shay smiled at her. "It's not a game."

Alex regarded her with a touch of wariness. "You know when you got out and pulled a disappearing act by going to Spain and not telling anyone, Sean got so mopey that people thought maybe he actually was in love with you. Even though most people knew you were his beard."

Shay smiled. It faded quickly. "I felt bad later, leaving like that in radio silence. Sean and I did get back in touch, around the time I reconnected with you, but I think you're right: I don't think he could fully forgive me for disappearing like that. It wasn't the same. He wasn't open with me like he used to be." Shay shook her head. "I didn't set out to burn bridges. I think I just needed to run."

"Is that why you came here?" Alex prodded. "Big, cold place to disappear?"

Shay focused on the shut closet doors beyond Alex. "No. I think I came here because I started to feel like I could stop running."

"How's that working out?"

"You said I look good, didn't you?"

Alex smirked. "And your hands feel good, too. That massage therapist thing has its benefits."

It was an invitation. But they'd unleashed a host of truths that lay bare that Shay's heart wasn't in it.

"What time's your flight?" Shay asked.

"Three-something."
"Let me take a shower and then I'll give you a real massage."

Alex got the message. She nodded. "You're on, Davydov."

*On the drive to the airport, Alex said, "You know that if you need to talk, I'm here for you."

Shay couldn't help the laugh that leapt out of her. Not at the idea of Alejandra Beltran listening to her relate various innocuous dramas of her life—that was a service Alex had proven capable of providing unasked in the small, scary hours, when Shay had swung between resigned and uncertain and, so quietly so as not to display it, clinging at the seams of her mind to keep from falling apart, leaking bits of thoughts like loose threads pulled out of a garment—but at the act of Alex making the offer itself.

That was new.

"En serio," Alex insisted, not so much earnest as she sounded miffed.

"Yeah, I know, I—sorry. I shouldn't have laughed."

Alex studied her profile. "I wish you'd known that back then. I wish I'd told you that, instead of just telling you to stop thinking so much."

Shay sucked at her lip, shook her head. "I'm not sure it would have made a difference. I didn't know how to talk about it."

Alex glanced out the passenger side window. "It's not like I asked, either." Alex propped her elbow on the window ledge and rubbed her thumb and forefinger together. "I'm not really sure how to ask. It's not really my thing."

Shay smiled. "Live and let live: the Beltran way."

Alex exhaled sharply in amusement. "Isn't that what you're trying to make happen here?"

A startled giggle erupted out of Shay. "You know, I hadn't thought of it that way."

"Maybe it doesn't feel like it yet," Alex ventured with a tenderness Shay wasn't accustomed to hearing from her. "You want to talk about what's got you wound up?"

Shay concentrated on traffic. "I'm not sure I know how to talk about it yet."

Alex nodded. A good soldier, she didn't need to be told twice. "Alright. I'll be stateside for the next few weeks at least. You have my number. And my Skype. If you want to talk."

Shay glanced over. Alex sat in her effortless self-possession, tinged now with an undertone of concern. Their history—furtive and ephemeral and packed into flashes of impressions that had dug deep inroads into Shay—had never held this.

Shay returned her eyes to the road and said, "Thanks."

Neither a refusal or commitment.

That was how Shay had conditioned herself to handle expectations of Alejandra Beltran.
Alex departed with no more fanfare than a long hug in her secure embrace. Disengaging, Alex held Shay lightly by the shoulders and said, "Offer's still on the table."

"Which one?" Shay asked, gripping Alex's elbows for balance.

Alex smiled, leaned in slow, and pressed her lips to Shay's in a kiss gentle and chaste. Alex pulled away with the same measured pomp and a satisfied smile. "All of them."

Shay smirked.

Alex released Shay, fondness in her gaze. "Don't disappear, Davydov."

"I should be saying that to you," Shay countered. "Watch yourself out there."

"I don't worry too much about going out there," Alex said with a small shake of her head. "Sometimes it's harder being over here."

Shay slipped her hands into the back pockets of her jeans and shrugged. "Stick around long enough and you'll get used to it."

"You offering a reason to stay?" Alex asked, grinning.

Shay shook her head, smile enfolding an affectionate reprimand. "Bye, Alex."

Alex's grin retreated into a wistful smile. "Bye, Shay."

But the wistfulness wasn't regret. It never was with Alex. Shay could envy that carefree outlook—and she did at times—but she couldn't begrudge Alex its freedom. To resent it was only to invite pain at the inevitable sight of Alex's receding form.

Alex never glanced back.

This time Shay didn't linger.

Chapter End Notes

A departure from previous chapters, I know. It felt odd for me, too, not to have Delphine or Cosima appear in a section. XD
Chapter 33

It was remarkable how Shay's apartment felt emptier without another presence after just one night of having company. (Admittedly, not just any company, not just "having someone over," not just a sense of spatial emptiness.) Shay contemplated her bed. The sheets should be stripped and changed, washed and dried, folded and stored. There was other laundry to do. There was enough weekend left to attend to chores.

Shay simply had to do it.

She didn't move.

Bad sign.

Shay knew the bad signs.

She didn't feel bad, exactly. Alex's visit had actually left behind a lightness Shay had not expected, not least because Shay found she had an absence of feeling. No longing. No resentment. No . . . regret.

The last surprised her. She harbored a mix of affection, gratitude, and—a remnant of the suppurating feelings that had dragged her down through the final stretch of her service—grievance toward Alex. That Alex had swept in and insinuated herself into the gaps exposed by the tremors of uncertainty and vulnerability that had ruptured within Shay under ballooning pressures, pushing Shay to the cusp of . . . something. That Shay had surrendered and succumbed to opportunity. Then and now.

In the past dallying with Alex had left Shay with a sense of lingering bitterness and weakness. Perhaps because Shay had wanted more, even at a time when she wouldn't have had the courage or wherewithal to grasp any magnitude of offer whatsoever, when her rationale had nurtured the sure, undeniable conviction that she would never get more from Alex. Shay had expected to tumble through the same gauntlet of emotions—along with disappointment (in herself), frustration, and ire.

But she didn't.

What lurked was emptiness, a vacancy of feeling, almost a detachment, akin to a sense of directionless. Relief and disillusionment traded cautionary blows across the landscape of her thoughts—now the heady wonderment of having escaped self-castigation, then the implosion of her surety in that expectation that led to an ambivalent sense of loss—of something she thought she'd wanted, of something she didn't know she'd stopped wanting, of not knowing what she wanted if not those illusory desires.

Shay had forgotten what it felt like to feel so out of touch with herself. A tremble of apprehension took up residence in the corner of her mind.

Shay moved mechanically, on the principle that sometimes the only way to break through an obstruction of functionality was to bulldoze through it. The mattress was stripped, laundry sorted (including the towel Alex had used), a load curried to the washer and the time noted. A clean second set of sheets went over the mattress, plants received water, dishes were washed, counters wiped, and the floors swept. That occupied time until the wash went into the dryer and a second load into the washer.

Dinner was pan-seared tilapia fillet, lime and butter and chile throwing up a cloud of sumptuous aromas and then igniting a balm of delectable notes on her tongue.
Dried articles came out of the dryer. Wet clothes went in. Warm, fluffy clothes were threaded onto hangers and folded and stacked and tossed into baskets.

With hands on her hips, Shay stood in the middle of her apartment and surveyed her handiwork.

(Shay didn't feel accomplished. Her life didn't feel reset or reordered. Her mind didn't click back into place. But. The tasks were complete.)

The knock drew her immediate attention.

Shay reflexively checked her phone. Perhaps she'd missed a message.

Nothing.

Which meant marginally less surprise accompanied the sight of Cosima beyond the door. Shay hung back, silent, unsure and apprehensive about what would unfold. Cosima lifted her eyes. Shay's concern shifted. Something felt off. Through the lenses of her glasses, Cosima's eyes appeared bright. Her hands fidgeted, running one over the other, and she looked—pale.

(But the hall light could be unflattering.)

"I'm sorry," Cosima blurted.

Shay studied Cosima guardedly.

"For—you know—Thursday—Thursday?—when I, uh, I shouldn't have—" Cosima grunted to clear her throat and sniffed. But the pause stretched. Cosima's gaze slid away. Her hands jerked aimlessly in little waves. Her respiration came in spurts. She swayed slightly on her feet. "I shouldn't've assumed—"

"Are you okay?" Shay asked cautiously, reaching out. She caught Cosima's elbow and through her fingertips felt the tremor pass through Cosima's muscles, into her, a moment before Cosima's legs folded and gave away. Shay darted forward to catch Cosima, managing to get her arms around the collapsing woman and blunt their entangled descent to the floor. Cosima folded into Shay, head lolling onto Shay's shoulder, forehead pressing against the bare skin of Shay's exposed collarbone, the heat in their contact immediate and shocking. "Oh, God, you're burning up."

"I'm sorry," Cosima muttered, eyes half-lidded, breaths coming in gasps.

Shay shook her head. "Cosima . . . Cosima, let's go inside, let's lie down."

"I'm sorry," Cosima repeated.

Shay swallowed frustration, which was the easier emotion to focus on among the burgeoning worry and fear. "Forget about that."

"I'm sorry."

"It's fine," Shay said, harried and flustered, then repeated the assertion, in a calmer, gentler tone. "It's fine, forget about that. You need to come inside. You need to lie down."

A cough wracked through Cosima, who, by reflex, turned her face into Shay's body. When her heaving stopped, Cosima slumped against Shay and uttered, "Ah, shit, sorry."
Shay, confused, looked down—and inhaled sharply. Blood speckled her blouse. And Cosima's lips. "Oh my God."

"I'm sorry," Cosima said, sounding miserable in contrition.

"We need to get you to the hospital," breathed Shay. "I'm going to call—"

"Call Delphine," Cosima gasped.

"What?" Shay said, unsure she had heard Cosima correctly in the breathless exhalation.

"Call Delphine."

Shay hesitated, then fumbled for her phone in her back pocket.

* * *

"Hello?" Delphine answered her phone. "Shay?"

"Delphine?" Shay said in a small, tight voice that contorted knots into Delphine's gut and sent her pulse accelerating.

"Shay? What's wrong?"

"It's, um," Shay said, articulation on the threshold of tremulous. "It's Cosima. She told me to call you. She's—she's burning up. She's got a high fever. And she—she coughed up blood. I think I need to take her to the hospital or call an—"

Delphine covered her eyes with a hand, adrenaline spiking, thoughts awhirl. "Shay. Take a deep breath." She gave Shay an eight-count to comply, following her own instructions in the meanwhile. "It's going to be okay. Okay?"

"Okay," Shay breathed from the other end.

"Listen to me: Don't call an ambulance. You're with Cosima?"

"Yeah."

"Where?"

"My place."

"Okay. Good. I'm coming over. Wait for me."

"What are you going to do? What's going on, Delphine?" Shay asked, pitch rising toward frantic.

"I'm coming to pick up Cosima and I'm going to help her."

"How?" Shay demanded.

"I'll be there soon," Delphine said with gentle but firm reassurance. "Wait for me."

* * *

Delphine focused on tangible tasks. There was a danger in crisis mode to let her thoughts dash ahead on assumptions and suppositions to spin out fanciful, energy-wasting scenarios. She needed to first assess the situation and attend to Cosima's immediate crisis; the answers would come later.
On the drive to Shay's residence, Delphine alerted the DYAD medical staff to prepare for Cosima's arrival. As she pulled up on the narrow street in front of the apartment building, Delphine conducted a brief internal debate about the risk of double parking, then did it anyway, killing the engine, slapping on the hazard lights, hustling out of the car, and absentmindedly locking it behind her.

At least Shay lived on the first floor. A delay between her knock and Shay answering left Delphine suspended in impotent antsiness, but when the door swung back, Delphine checked a reflex to recoil. She stared. Shay, her breathless greeting garnering no reaction and reading Delphine's expression with bewilderment, followed Delphine's gaze down to the front of her blouse.

"Ah, I forgot," Shay muttered. "It's Cosima's blood. Come on, she's over here."

Shay hustled to the couch. Huddled in a blanket Cosima lay curled in a tight ball.

"Cosima?" Delphine entreated softly, leaning over her.

Cosima, with the minimum amount of movement required to catch Delphine's eye, flashed her a half-grin. "Look who's here. I guess we can get the party started."

Delphine pressed the back of her hand to Cosima's forehead, then her cheek, and Cosima closed her eyes and leaned into her touch.

"That feels good," Cosima croaked.

Delphine's fingers were stiff with the cold that sometimes plagued her extremities in winter. Cosima's skin radiated heat. And clamminess. A gentle probe of Cosima's lymph nodes found them swollen. A quick read of Cosima's pulse was about as encouraging.

Shay hovered anxiously. Delphine turned to her.

"Can you help me get her to my car? I'm parked right out front."

"Where are you taking her?" Shay asked, with firmness. There was a cast to her delivery that made Delphine imagine Shay rehearsing the question from the moment Delphine hung up.

"To a private medical facility."

Shay's eyes assessed Delphine's face with intent. Shay crossed her arms. "You knew . . . you knew about this?"

The words struggled between statement and inquiry.

"Now is not the time, Shay. Cosima needs attention. Immediately." Delphine softened her tone. "Help me. Please."

Shay hesitated. Delphine thought about the countless unasked questions Shay didn't let herself ask, the whole new set Shay would be asking in the near future. They seemed to be passing through Shay's mind. But Shay set her mouth into a grim line and leapt into action. Together they got boots on Cosima's feet, the pair having been sitting shod or ready by the door. (Delphine realized that there was a set of unfamiliar slippers by the foot of the couch, the detail odd enough to note but far from pressing enough to contemplate.) As Shay shrugged on her own heavy coat to withstand the frigid temperatures, Delphine asked Cosima at a low pitch, "Can you walk?"

Cosima nodded. With heavy weariness. Without bravado or witticism, a sober light of clarity in her eyes emerging through the fever brightness.
But then Cosima's mouth twitched into a feeble, but sharp grin. "Should've . . . been into guys.  Could've . . . had a beefcake . . . for a monitor." Cosima took a deep breath and exhaled the rest in a single burst: "He could have carried me out."

Delphine threw up a shoulder in a nonchalant half-shrug. "I could try. But I'd have to put you on my shoulders. It would be undignified and uncomfortable."

"No, it would be dangerous," corrected Shay sternly as she rejoined them. "There's a good chance your hip would give out, then we'd need to get you both to the hospital. I can't believe you'd even suggest it."

Cosima leaned back with an exhalation that was a laugh, eyes on Delphine. "So that's what it was. Your hip."

Delphine sensed Shay glancing in her direction, but only shook her head. At Cosima. That even now Cosima would seize an opportunity to wheedle her. Ignoring the comment, Delphine took hold of Cosima's one arm, Shay took the other other, and together Shay and Delphine raised Cosima to her feet, the blanket draped about her like a shawl. Out to the car they shuffled and toddled at the pace of the least competitive three-legged race.

"Backseat or front seat?" Shay asked. "She might feel better lying down."

Delphine nodded—and made a mental note that if Cosima lay down in the backseat, she wouldn't be wearing a seatbelt. Caution, rather than speed, would have to dictate Delphine's driving. As they lowered Cosima into the backseat, Shay said, "I'm going with you."

"What?" Delphine asked, pulling back sharply. "No. Why? I'll take care of her. Trust me. I'm a doctor."

"Delphine," Shay enunciated her name with care and sternness, eyes widening with insistence. With a tiny jerk of her head she redirected Delphine's attention to the form crumpled in the backseat, a lump collapsed onto the leather. Cosima looked small and vulnerable. The sight made Delphine's anxiety and nervousness spike. What seeing Cosima laid so low made Shay feel when she had no inkling of what was happening or the degree of the peril Delphine could only imagine.

Delphine hesitated. She could stand here fighting with Shay or let Shay—do what Shay wanted to do.

Too many considerations to weigh at once tumbled through Delphine's mind: that taking Shay with them would mean exposing her to the DYAD, that Shay had no clearance to be present in the restricted areas of the facility vital to Cosima's care, that more likely than not Shay would be cast aside in the ensuing bustle, that Delphine needed to concentrate on Cosima and not—

"She shouldn't be alone," Shay said very quietly, almost like a sigh but with the force of an assertion. The softness of her expression, the open entreaty, derailed Delphine's deliberations.

"I'll be with her," tried Delphine in one last diversionary tactic.

Shay's lips parted, surprise and consternation drawing and quartering the efforts of her expression, and for a moment Delphine thought Shay would be stymied by a compulsion for tact. But Shay said, "As a doctor or as a friend?"

Delphine's breath caught—on an objection and on the object reality that she and Cosima were not friends, not really, and that Shay had adroitly caught her in a potential conflict, that even if she and Cosima had been friends, perhaps Delphine would have found it difficult in the situation to be both
friend and doctor.

Delphine had had no luck trying to be either with Jennifer.

Delphine sucked at her lips. "Shay, I don't know if I can get you into the building."

Shay shook her head. "Then I'll just go with you for the ride and if I have to come back, I will. I'll take a train back or get a taxi or something."

A spike of irritation almost made Delphine snap, Why are you being so difficult? Why are you insisting on coming?, but she swallowed the impulse. Shay would not be dissuaded. Delphine could see it in Shay's eyes. Delphine did not think of Shay as a hard or implacable person and she saw now that perhaps she had been lulled into a sense of complacency as to Shay's pliability.


They broke their huddle and circled around in opposing directions to the other side of the car, Delphine into the driver's seat, Shay into the backseat behind her. The drive was conspicuously quiet but for the indecipherable murmur of the radio. Different threads of thought competed for Delphine's consideration. There were the logistics of admitting Cosima—fluids to be gathered, tests to be ordered, medicines to be administered—and concerns about causation—a reaction to the stem cells, an infection, some other cause as of yet undetermined?—and Shay.

Shay.

Delphine snuck glances at her in the rearview mirror. Delphine could not see Cosima, who lay with her head pillowed upon Shay's lap, but the headlights of oncoming traffic picked out the faint air of worry that clung to Shay's features. Shay did not speak to Cosima, but occasionally glanced down at her. At a stoplight Delphine turned to check on her passengers and found Shay stroking Cosima's temple, her cheek, moving on to rub and squeeze her shoulder.

The tenderness in Shay's touch made Delphine glance away, as if she'd witnessed an act private and intimate. She did not look again.

Ten minutes out from their arrival, Delphine phoned ahead to the medical bay. A nurse stood waiting with a wheelchair when Delphine pulled up to the curb. As she climbed out, Delphine had resolved on a course of action. She issued orders to the orderly, gesturing that he should come around to the passenger side, and then wordlessly guided Shay into helping situate Cosima into the wheelchair. As they headed into the building Delphine took a brief hold of Shay's elbow to position her into lockstep beside her. When Shay glanced up at her questioningly, Delphine nodded without turning her head. Through her peripheral vision, Delphine saw comprehension unfurl into the straightening of Shay's spine and the purposeful lift of Shay's chin.

If Delphine sometimes wondered if Shay had really served in any military, she felt rebuked for her doubt by Shay's display of irreproachable bearing.

Delphine flashed her identification badge and a perfunctory nod at the security guard. The nurse did not so much as glance over at the bored looking uniform. Neither did Shay. Delphine ushered the whole party onwards and through security doors. To her credit, Shay's gaze remained fixed ahead and did not wander as they progressed deeper into the facility.

A handful of nurses swarmed them as they wheeled into the care ward. Delphine began to issue assignments and tasks—and nearly faltered unbalanced by a moment's snapshot of Shay moving as if she were part of the team, unhesitatingly assisting Cosima into the bed, then reaching up to begin
removing Cosima's garments to exchange for a hospital robe. Cosima's limbs moved with reluctant cooperation as they slipped the robe on her. Delphine found her voice again and soon the cogs eased from a stutter into a whirl.

"Are you hurting?" Delphine asked in concern as she commandeered a stethoscope.

Cosima nodded. "A little. Yeah, no. Achey." She took a deep breath and winced. "Headache." Her eyes landed dismayed on Delphine. "Delphine . . . you think this could be—"

"Sh," Delphine urged her, slipping the diaphragm of the stethoscope to Cosima's exposed back. "I don't know. It's too soon to say. We'll have to wait for the results of the tests. Now: deep breath in. And out. Again. And . . ."

Cosima's temperature hovered just below 39 degrees Celsius and her blood pressure was within acceptable parameters. At some point after Delphine noted how Shay held Cosima's free hand as a nurse inserted an IV into her other one and then became preoccupied with seeing that Cosima's blood sample was rushed to the lab, instructing the nurse to keep an eye on Cosima's temperature and to have ibuprofen on hand, corralling another nurse to bring in a cannula because the sound and effort of Cosima's respiration troubled her, and arranging for a second shift as overnight relief, Delphine lost track of Shay.

Delphine found Shay when she stepped out of Cosima's room, standing—not sitting, because there were no seats—with her back pressed to the wall, staying out of the way. Delphine joined her.

"Hey," Delphine said. "How about I take you home?"

Shay glanced up at her. There was a studied distance in her gaze, in the line of her posture. "That's a bit of a drive. If you want to stay, I can get a ride."

"It's not any trouble," Delphine assured her. "I'll be on call."

"But shouldn't you stay?" Shay paused. "Shouldn't someone stay?"

"Cosima drifted off. She's resting now. If she needs anything or if there are any changes, the nurses will be here and I'll be contacted. At this point the biggest concern is her fever, but the most we can do is monitor the situation. We have to wait for the tests to tell us more—and the staff to run those won't be here until morning. I can take you home and be back here long before they arrive."

Shay glanced uncertainly at the door.

"Shay," Delphine said lowly, "you can't stay."

"No one's said anything yet."

"Because it hasn't occurred to anyone to ask. Yet. But they will." Delphine stepped closer, pitching her voice softer. "I don't want to talk here."

Shay took a small step back, the better to study Delphine's eyes. Delphine met her gaze with sincerity.

Shay nodded.

They didn't speak in the car. Shay sat gazing out the passenger window. About fifteen minutes into their journey, Delphine said, "Do you want a cup of coffee or tea?"
"At this hour?" Shay wondered.

"I could use one."

"Okay," Shay acceded reluctantly.

Delphine pulled over at the brightest, coziest cafe she spotted. Shay looked at it quizzically. "Have you been here before?"

"No."

At the cafe entrance Delphine reached for the door handle, but then stopped and turned to fully inspect Shay in the light cast through the floor-to-ceiling windows front. Shay watched her closely, a touch of wariness in her eyes that weighed down Delphine's heart. Delphine reached for Shay but halted midway in the effort and reversed course, pointing at her own chest. "Your shirt."

Shay looked down. With her coat unbuttoned, visible were the areas of her blouse stained with flecks of blood.

"Oh," Shay breathed and wrestled with the ties of her coat to hide the evidence.

Delphine watched and smiled sadly.

A visual assessment put the cafe at perhaps half capacity. At the counter Shay ordered a small hot chocolate and Delphine opted for café au lait. They milled around the counter to wait for their orders, quiet and not quite companionable. Delphine felt the distance between them, the way Shay radiated closed off and self-contained. When their orders were ready, Delphine indicated an unoccupied couch in the corner. Shay followed without objection.

When they settled, side-by-side, Delphine opened, hesitantly, with, "How was your weekend? Did your friend's visit go well?"

A bark of derisive laughter exploded out of Shay. She shook her head and stared down at the black lid of the disposable cup she cradled in her hands. "Yeah, it . . . it went about how I expected it to." Shay nodded absentmindedly, nibbled at her lower lip. "You know I have a lot of questions."

"Yes," Delphine exhaled.

"I don't know where to even start."

Delphine nodded.

"Is that where you work?" Shay asked quietly.

"Yes."

"It looked nice," Shay told her unsampled hot chocolate. She turned piercing blue eyes on Delphine. "Is Cosima sick?"

Delphine pressed her fingers into the paper cup in her hands, as if drawing in the warmth of the coffee could fortify her replies. "You saw."

Shay shook her head. "Delphine. Please. You know I'm not asking if she has a cold or the flu. It's not—we—medicine can treat tuberculosis. Is it—is it cancer? Is it her lungs? Has she been sick this whole time?"
Delphine shook her head. "I can't discuss particulars with you."

"Because you're her doctor?"

"Because it's not my place," asserted Delphine evenly, knowing from the way Shay flinched back slightly that Shay recognized that Delphine spoke sense—that Shay recognized the impropriety of her inquiry. "And, yes, because I'm her doctor."

Shay's lips thinned in a more measured intensity of thought. "I thought you were her boss."

"I am."

Shay's forehead crinkled. "So that wasn't a cover story? You're her boss and her doctor?"

Delphine exhaled. "Yes. It's complicated."

Shay's jaw flexed. "Is she—how sick is she? Is that why she can get so angry?"

Delphine's lips parted but words didn't come immediately. "It's . . . complicated. That's the simplest way I can put it." A short pause, then she conceded, "I think there may be several reasons that could explain Cosima's anger, but I couldn't tell you why she might be angry in any given moment."

"Is she seeing anyone?" Shay asked. "Like a counselor?"

Delphine faltered, because the notion of Cosima speaking frankly to a counselor about the paranoia of being the product and subject of a secret—extraordinary—human experiment and the suffering she endured from a resultant illness was so ludicrous as to never have been a possibility in the same way Delphine had never contemplated the option for herself—Shay's concerns about her mental well being having validity or not. "No."

"Maybe she should," Shay said at low volume. "I can get some referrals. Not the names I've given you, but counselors experienced with people who are . . . ill."

"I'm not sure that's something Cosima would be open to," Delphine said carefully, "but she may appreciate the gesture."

Shay dropped her gaze, consternation bending her brow, "I can't—no one can force her to get counselling—but . . . I think that maybe . . . with the way she can be so angry at you, she might be taking out her frustrations on you because you're her doctor. And her boss."

Delphine shook her head. "It's complicated, Shay."

"I'm trying to make sense of this," Shay said quietly.

"I know."

"And if she talked to someone—"

"I know. I understand," Delphine assured her.

Shay nodded in a distracted air. Sorrow overlay the gaze that found Delphine's. "Is this why you were so weird around her? Is this why you've been so careful not to talk about her?"

Delphine sank back into the couch cushions, arms resting upon the tops of her thighs, cup exuding warmth through her trousers. No answer readily distilled from the morass of prohibited explanations—the truths were many and classified, proprietary and personal, revealing and private. Delphine
settled on simply nodding.

Shay studied her in silence. Delphine gazed back, waiting. Slowly Shay's hand disengaged from around the cup of hot chocolate and settled on Delphine's forearm, fingers laying light upon Delphine's wrist. Shay's hand slipped, a query, towards Delphine's palm. Delphine understood. Her hand unwrapped from the comfort of the coffee and into that vacuum slipped Shay's hand, squeezing for a moment, then simply holding onto Delphine, fingers tentatively interlacing.

"How bad is it?" Shay asked, in barely more than a whisper, gaze focused on their point of connection.

"I'm doing everything I can think of," Delphine said.

"I know."

Silence.

Shay swallowed. "That means it's bad, doesn't it?"

"Shay, please . . ."

"Sorry." Shay closed her eyes, forehead furrowing with the effort. "I know. I know." She breathed out, eyes opening and focusing on nothing specific. "I'm sorry about earlier, too. I didn't mean to put you on the spot. I know you didn't want me to come with you."

Delphine stifled a frown. In a soft voice, she allowed, "You were focused on Cosima's needs."

Shay caught her eye, one eyebrow slightly cocked. "Weren't you?"

Delphine summoned a tired smile.

Not entirely.

Delphine replied, "You were thinking about Cosima's comfort—her state of mind. I was focused on privacy."

Shay bowed her head, hair falling to shield her expression. "Honestly, I'm not sure which one Cosima would have prioritized," Shay said. She turned her wrist, twisting Delphine's hand with hers, and exposed to examination the play of Delphine's metacarpals beneath the sheath of skin. "You were right not to tell me, of course. Cosima never—I had no idea. I wouldn't have guessed. I mean, I knew about her cough, but—"

Delphine sat quietly, letting Shay work through her thoughts.

A tremble quivered upon Shay's lower lip. "Do you remember when I told you the reason why I don't eat meat?"

"Yes," Delphine confirmed in a hush. The maimed soldier had been the first reconfiguring insight into Shay.

"I couldn't—there was nothing I could do for him," Shay said quietly, "except . . . be there. I stayed with him until the evac got there. And I rode with him in transport. I held his hand. I'll never forget—I'll never forget how scared and confused he looked. How lost and alone."

Delphine sat quiet, waiting, expectant, but Shay elaborated no further. The story lay between them as explanation and apology. Delphine squeezed the hand in hers.
After the long pause, Shay asked, "Where you work is not like a regular hospital, is it?"

"No," Delphine concurred simply.

Shay nodded. "The type of research you do, it's . . . cutting edge?"

"I can't discuss it," Delphine said softly.

Shay nodded, the cast of her mouth sad and heavy. Her hand rested leaden inside Delphine's.

"What happens now?" Shay asked.

"We wait and see," Delphine said simply. Shay turned to her, surprise stretched across her brows, but it was the only answer Delphine had. Only after she spoke did Delphine realize she had no certainty as to what Shay had been referring, whether that was Cosima's hospitalization, what Shay should do with her newfound knowledge, or what would happen in the next five minutes right there in the coffee shop.

They sat for a time unmoving and without speaking, as if the waiting had commenced and the seeing would be imminent. Then Delphine sipped at her coffee and Shay followed suit. They stayed until they finished their beverages.

"Thank you," Delphine said before they relinquished the couch.

"For what?" Shay asked.

"For listening to Cosima. And to me."

Shay glanced away. "If you mean tonight, when she told me to call you and I did, I didn't know what else to do."

"You did the right thing."

Shay avoided Delphine's eyes. She didn't answer.

They stood to go. Shay wordlessly slipped her hand out of Delphine's. Delphine's fingers curled around the air that Shay's hand had occupied before she slipped her hand into her pocket to preserve the warmth against the cold of the night.

* 

At one point during the remainder of the drive, Shay asked, "Did you tell me to be careful with Cosima because you knew she was sick?"

To that Delphine possessed no easy answers. Everything curt played in preview as dismissive or crass or indifferent.

"If you had known she was sick," posed Delphine instead, speaking gently, "would it have changed anything?"

Shay didn't answer. Which meant neither did Delphine.

* 

Stepping out of the car, Shay turned around, leaned down to catch Delphine's eye, and asked, "Are you going back?"
"Yes."

Shay didn't budge, her expression torn.

Pity tugged at Delphine's mouth. "Cosima understands that you can't be there."

But Shay said, "Are you okay?"

The surprise probably showed on Delphine's face, but Delphine strove for nonchalance. "The coffee will help and there's more coffee there if needed."

Shay's gaze set into somber lines. "Counselling is an option for you, too. Staying healthy will help you help Cosima."

Delphine felt the soft, astonished smile possess her lips. "Right now I'm not the priority."

"That doesn't mean you neglect yourself," Shay said.

"One thing at a time," cautioned Delphine, finding herself reluctant to dismiss Shay's concern, but unwilling to make a concession she couldn't keep.

"I'm worried about you," Shay said plainly.

"I'm not the one you should be worried about."

"I think I can spare enough worry for two," countered Shay. Delphine stewed in the response she couldn't voice: That she hadn't meant herself or even Cosima should rank at the top of Shay's hierarchy of worry. Shay bit her lower lip. "I've seen what a situation like this can do to you. I didn't really understand then, but now I get it. I see what the stakes are."

No, Shay didn't. Because if she did, Delphine wasn't sure worry would have been her reaction.

Delphine shook her head and offered a faint smile. "This is my job."

Shay's gaze hovered steady on Delphine's face. "But did you know what you were getting into?"

Perhaps this was why Delphine didn't cultivate connections—too much shared history rendered obfuscation difficult.

"I'm a doctor. This is part of the territory," Delphine warded her off. "I should get back."

The pronouncement unleashed conflict across Shay's expression. Reluctantly she said, "Okay. I'll . . . probably be up for a bit."

Delphine smiled, hearing the couched offer. "Don't stay up too late. Good night."

"Good night," Shay parroted with awkwardness. She remained standing in the door for another moment, then stepped back and closed it. Shay moved out of the car's radius even as Delphine idled, intending to watch Shay go into her building. But Shay turned when she made the sidewalk and stood in the spot looking at Delphine's car, until Delphine eased off the brake and coasted away.

Shay raised a hand in a small wave. Farther down the street, a glance in the side mirror revealed a diminishing figure unmoved. Delphine looked away and focused ahead, mouth set in a grim line.

There was a long night ahead. Delphine had to put Shay out of her mind. Including the veiled proposal of companionship and conversation. Delphine had long been careful to shield Shay from
the details of the DYAD reality.

Delphine had no intention of stopping now.
Monday dawned harrowing, despite the fact that Cosima slept through much of the attention given to
every increment of change in her condition and the contingent uncertainty that chained hour to hour.
The only break occurred early when Delphine returned to the lab to explain Cosima's absence to
Scott with—Delphine almost laughed—the truth.

"Cosima is sick today," she told him. "She won't be coming in."

"Oh," Scott breathed lowly. "I hope it's not too bad."

"I don't know," Delphine replied.

The truth.

She fabricated non-excuses for her own forced departure from the lab, words she assumed were
strung into sentences that provided vague impressions of importance, and left Scott the run of the
place and the hope that his current lines of inquiry and research could contain his curiosity. Delphine
preferred having only one fire to deal with at a time.

The afternoon arrived clawing through the minutes and offered an emergent diagnosis and a light of
counterbalance.

Delphine almost laughed.

"Influenza," Delphine informed Cosima when the worst of the fever abated to allow consciousness
to take root in the tired, unfocused because unaided, but steady eyes peering up at Delphine.

"You're joking," Cosima muttered in a voice that crackled.

Delphine shrugged. "The fever, the aches, the fatigue, congestion—it's the flu."

Cosima closed her eyes and exhaled in a low groan. "If it's not my own body conspiring against me,
it's microbes."

"You must have felt the symptoms before Sunday," Delphine remarked mildly.

"I was supposed to expect some discomfort, remember?" Cosima griped. "I figured it was going to
pass temporarily. I didn't want to freak you out over something inconsequential."

Delphine nodded in concession. "In a way, that this is the flu is good news. Your body isn't rejecting
the stem cells."

Cosima cleared her throat. Delphine reached to fill a cup with water but Cosima waved her off with a
shake of her head. "I could have stayed at home."

"No," Delphine said, "that wasn't possible, not with how high your fever was—and you were on the
brink of dehydration. It was better to bring you here."

Cosima pressed back into the pillows and stared up at the ceiling. "Is Shay mad?"
Delphine checked a frown of puzzlement, though it was unlikely Cosima could discern it without her glasses. "Mad? Why would you think that? She was scared. She's worried."

Cosima studied Delphine with narrow-eyed interest. "Did you talk to Shay?"

Delphine nodded. "We talked. I answered some of her questions and avoided the ones I could. She knows you are ill, that you have been ill since you met, but not any of the specifics. She accepted that you and I have doctor-patient confidentiality."

Cosima lifted a brow. "Meaning she knows you're my doctor."

Delphine nodded.

"She's not mad?"

Delphine exhaled. "She sent me a message earlier asking how you are doing. I don't think she's mad. Overwhelmed, perhaps." Delphine shook her head. "Why do you think she would be angry? At you or at me?"

Cosima shrugged. "Maybe I'm projecting. Anger seems like the rational response when you're blindsided by withheld information."

"This wasn't information she was entitled to know," reasoned Delphine.

The pointed contrast wasn't lost on Cosima to judge by the unimpressed glance she sent in Delphine's direction. "Whose benefit are you saying that for?"

Delphine moistened her lips. "I did not think Shay would be your first concern."

"Seeing you made me think of her."

"Seeing me?"

"Shay's your first concern."

"You are my first concern," Delphine parried with patience. "Getting you well is my priority."

"And keeping me away from Shay."

"Keeping the DYAD away from Shay," Delphine clarified.

"And Shay away from the DYAD?"

Delphine didn't nab the bait. She was tired and tired of arguing with Cosima. "With the state of your immune system, infections can be perilous."

Cosima's eyebrows twitched in acknowledgement of the change in topic. But she was tired, too. "What are you proposing then? Putting me in a bubble? I can be the first bubble clone."

Delphine fought down the impulse to cross her arms. "You need to speak to Sarah."

"Ah," Cosima intoned. "You want me to leverage my fragility to push her hand. Dr. Cormier, let me assure you, I'm not eager to die. Plus I don't even know if my phone is here."

"It is," Delphine said softly. "It's on the stand there. You missed calls."
Cosima raised an eyebrow. "You didn't answer?"

"I'm sure they left messages if it was important," Delphine said.

"Or they're lying in a ditch because they couldn't reach help."

"You weren't in any condition to provide aid to anyone."

Cosima smirked, acceding the point. "Yeah, well, I'm doing what I can on my end and Sarah's doing what she can on her end."

Delphine's eyes narrowed. "What does that mean?"

Cosima closed her eyes. "I'll get back to you on that when Sarah gets back to me."

* *

From Shay [12:30]: How is Cosima?
To Shay [13:34]: She's looking better.
From Shay [13:34]: :)
To Shay [19:58]: Cosima is doing much better now.
To Shay [19:58]: I think she is over the worst.
From Shay [19:58]: U don't have to keep me updated but thank u.
To Shay [19:59]: I don't want you to worry.
To Shay [20:11]: She's doing better. Honestly.
From Shay [20:11]: That's good.
From Shay [20:11]: How r u?
To Shay [20:12]: A little tired.
From Shay [20:12]: Have u had dinner?
To Shay [20:12]: Not yet. I'm heading home soon.
From Shay [20:12]: Oh. Have a safe drive.
To Shay [20:13]: Thank you. I will try.
To Shay [20:58]: How are you?
From Shay [20:58]: Home?
To Shay [20:58]: Yes. With pasta.
From Shay [20:59]: Good?
To Shay [20:59]: It is takeout from a nearby restaurant. Not like the Italian restaurant we went to in the summer, but it will do.
To Shay [20:59]: How are you?
From Shay [20:59]: I forgot about that place. They had great cannolis.
From Shay [20:59]: I'm ok.
To Shay [21:00]: What are you thinking?
From Shay [21:00]: What?
To Shay [21:00]: Distract me from my thoughts.
From Shay [21:00]: U got me thinking abt cannolis.
From Shay [21:00]: That's not much to distract u from ur thoughts.
To Shay [21:01]: It does make me regret that I do not have something sweet.
From Shay [21:01]: This is the opposite of me helping u
From Shay [21:04]: Before that tho I was thinking about u.
From Shay [21:04]: Which wouldn't do much to distract u either.
To Shay [21:04]: Yes?
To Shay [21:04]: Are you mad?
From Shay [21:06]: I was thinking abt how I couldn't do what u do.
To Shay [21:06]: You don't do what I do.
From Shay [21:06]: U know what I mean.
From Shay [21:06]: I think I'd be too scared.
From Shay [21:08]: Are u scared?
To Shay [21:08]: Yes.
To Shay [21:08]: That's normal.
From Shay [21:11]: What I meant is that ur stronger than I am.
From Shay [21:12]: I wasn't comfortable with feeling like it took so little to have power over life or death
From Shay [21:12]: or knowing that life was so fragile
To Shay [21:13]: This was when you were in the military?
From Shay [21:13]: Yeah.
From Shay [21:13]: It wasn't for me
From Shay [21:13]: it made me feel like an imposter
From Shay [21:13]: or like a coward
From Shay [21:13]: That's why I can't imagine doing what u r doing.
To Shay [21:14]: The situations are so different. I don't think there is room for comparison.
From Shay [21:14]: if u say so
To Shay [21:14]: I do.
To Shay [21:14]: I cannot imagine we would be on a battlefield together, but you're the one I want with me when I want to talk.
From Shay [21:14]: The present excepted. I'm not doing a very good job of distracting u like u asked.
From Shay [21:15]: U shouldn't be reassuring me right now.
From Shay [21:15]: U have enough to worry about.
To Shay [21:15]: I don't mind. You don't let me worry about you. Case in point.
To Shay [21:16]: Which reminds me: did you get a flu shot?
From Shay [21:16]: No. why?
To Shay [21:16]: Pay attention if you start to feel flu-like symptoms.
From Shay [21:16]: Is it going around?
To Shay [21:17]: So it seems. You've been exposed.
From Shay [21:17]: Do u have the flu? Or do u mean Cosima?
From Shay [21:19]: I take it that means Cosima
From Shay [21:19]: but coughing up blood isn't a symptom of the flu, right? That's something else, something from before.
From Shay [21:19]: Right?
To Shay [21:20]: I'm sorry I'm laughing
From Shay [21:20]: :(
From Shay [21:20]: I don't think there's anything to laugh abt.
From Shay [21:20]: Or is this an excuse not to answer my questions?
To Shay [21:20]: Sorry.
To Shay [21:21]: You know there is an ethical line I can't cross.
To Shay [21:21]: If I could answer your questions frankly, I would.
From Shay [21:21]: Really?
To Shay [21:21]: But I thought that you should know that you could be falling ill.
To Shay [21:22]: Yes. Really. You don't think I would answer your questions?
From Shay [21:23]: I guess I was never sure where the limits were
From Shay [21:23]: beyond not talking abt work
To Shay [21:25]: I didn't know you felt that way.
From Shay [21:25]: Not in a bad way.
From Shay [21:26]: It made me feel cautious.
From Shay [21:26]: U aren't the easiest person to read.
From Shay [21:26]: It was rewarding when I felt like I was getting to know u.
To Shay [21:27]: You no longer feel that way?
From Shay [21:27]: U keep surprising me.
To Shay [21:28]: In a good way or a bad way?
From Shay [21:29]: Most of the time in a good way.
To Shay [21:29]: And the other times?
From Shay [21:30]: Other times I'm not sure I'll ever understand.
From Shay [21:30]: I'm sure there r times when u feel that way about me.
To Shay [21:30]: What is something you wanted to know but considered outside limits?
From Shay [21:31]: I don't know.
From Shay [21:31]: Do u like cookies?
To Shay [21:31]: Yes?
To Shay [21:32]: I eat them. But in terms of sweets, you must find a good pâtisserie.
To Shay [21:32]: There was one that was on my way to school. Almost everyday I would buy a croissant or a pain au chocolat. Sometimes an éclair.
To Shay [21:33]: On some weekends or special occasions I would choose selections of mille feuille or give choux à la crème as gifts.
To Shay [21:33]: There is nothing here like it.
To Shay [21:33]: It is one of the things I miss about France.
From Shay [21:34]: The bread
To Shay [21:34]: An oversimplification.
To Shay [21:34]: But yes.
To Shay [21:34]: You have to experience it. You will understand.
To Shay [21:35]: You considered this a question you couldn't ask?
From Shay [21:35]: No.
From Shay [21:35]: That was something i wondered recently.
To Shay [21:35]: What was something you felt you couldn't ask?
From Shay [21:37]: Some things sound too silly to ask once u think about asking them.
To Shay [21:37]: You can ask silly things.
From Shay [21:39]: I'll try not to hold back from now on.

Within a couple days Cosima proclaimed she felt well enough to "fly the coop."

Delphine, at the time of this declaration one foot in the door of the ward, stopped. Cosima sat upright on the bed, legs crossed and covered by the blanket in which she'd arrived wrapped, laptop—not her personal hardware, but a company device Cosima preferred to the option of a tablet—situated on the mattress before her, appearing tethered in place by the snaking tube extending from the cannula.

"I have to get out of here," Cosima continued. "I can't spend another day stuck in this bed."

"I understand how you feel," Delphine allowed with caution as she closed the door behind her.
"Your condition is much improved—but you haven't recovered your strength. And I'm going to order you to stay on the oxygen as much as possible. I think another day under observation is best."

Cosima shook her head. "I'm going stir crazy. I need some fresh air, a glimpse of the sky, a cup of tea that isn't bagged Lipton—no, an actual mug of tea. I need an internet connection that doesn't make me paranoid. I need a real shower—no more of this getting toweled down."

"As far as I understand," Delphine said slowly, "the nurses are no longer toweling you down."
"Yeah, they decided I could have my dignity back," Cosima remarked sardonically. She smirked. "I can't reach my back like they did though. You know that one spot, right in the middle . . ."

Delphine's lips twitched, passingly. She looked down at the tips of her shoes, then ventured a cautious nod. "I have concerns."

Cosima rocked slightly in a redistribution of her weight, tucking the edges of the blanket beneath her thighs. "Shoot."

Delphine crossed her arms. "I'm not sure you could walk the distance from your bed to the parking lot without becoming out of breath."

"If this place follows typical hospital regulations—and I'm not so sure it does—but I assume I'd make that trip in a wheelchair. But point taken." Cosima waved a hand. "Next."

"Contingent on that," Delphine continued, "I'm not sure you could be left without assistance."

Cosima sat, waiting, then spread her hands. "You're not going to offer?"

Delphine sighed. "That's not my point, Cosima. You need more time to rest. Your body is engaged in two battles. Let it win one and recuperate."

"Right now it feels like I'm engaged in just one battle and it's with you."

Delphine closed her eyes and pressed upon the point between her eyebrows.

"Come here, Delphine."

Delphine opened her eyes. Cosima looked at her expectantly. When she didn't move, Cosima waved her over. Suppressing a sigh, Delphine crossed to the bed's side. Cosima beckoned her closer. Delphine leaned down.

"It's hard to carry out certain conversations in here," Cosima said softly. "It doesn't feel right, with people coming and going."

Delphine straightened up. She covered her mouth, dragged her fingers across her lips. "Is Sarah trying to contact you?"

Cosima shrugged. "Let's say if she were, this is not the place I'd want to hold an indepth conversation."

"Is that a general rule you follow?" Delphine asked.

Cosima smiled. "You expect me to confess my methods to my monitor?"

Rancor didn't underscore Cosima's tone, but neither was it flippant. Only the smile offset any lurking sharpness.

"Tomorrow," Delphine said. She disliked that her words hit the chord between a command and a plea.

Cosima frowned. "First thing tomorrow."

"We'll see how it goes," Delphine hedged. A flash of ire in Cosima's eyes prompted Delphine to add, "But . . . tomorrow." She paused. "You need clothes. Your coat, at least. You weren't wearing one when we brought you here."
"You're offering to pick them up for me? You'll play personal assistant but not nurse?" Cosima mused. Her sharp canine peeked out from her smirk. "Honestly, it's like you don't even see the opportunities to stretch your monitor muscles. You're right though—in this case. But I don't think our fashion senses overlap. I'll tell you what to get." Cosima glanced away. "So you don't have to go snooping."

Delphine, who had not considered snooping (but perhaps should have in light of the validity of Cosima's criticisms regarding her capabilities), crossed her arms and waited.

"The problem is that I don't know where my keys are," Cosima said, turning back to Delphine. "I haven't seen them here, unless you put them somewhere else."

Delphine shook her head in the negative.

Cosima nodded. "Then I think Shay has them. She must have forgotten to put them back in my pocket when she went upstairs to get my boots."

"She went upstairs to get your boots?"

"After I convinced her to call you. I wore slippers down to her place."

Delphine nodded with the intention to file away the detail as an innocuous tidbit relating to Sunday night's events, but curiosity caught up with her. "Were you with Shay before you began to feel ill? Or did you go to Shay for help because you were feeling ill?"

Cosima lifted one shoulder in a shrug. "Neither."

Delphine hesitated. "Then why did you go to Shay?"

Cosima studied her face. "You don't know?"

Delphine had no wish to be the easy mark, but she asked, "Know what?"

Cosima shook her head. "Ask Shay when you borrow my keys from her."

Delphine sighed and, because the past handful of days had been long, blurted, "Do you enjoy games?"

"Do you?" fired back Cosima.

"No," Delphine said, on the brink of exasperation.

Cosima gave her a look that was almost pitying. "Then you took the wrong job."

If nothing else, given Cosima's assertive performance, Delphine was well convinced her patient was on her way to recovery. Against the flu, at least.

* *

From Delphine [5:15]: Hey? Shay?
To Delphine [6:05]: Hey, just leaving work. What's up?
From Delphine [6:08]: Hey. Do you have the keys to Cosima's apartment?
To Delphine [6:08]: I do! I hung them on the hook out of reflex and totally forgot about them.
To Delphine [6:08]: Does she need them?
To Delphine [6:08]: Sorry, abt to drive.
From Delphine [6:09]: I need them. I would like to retrieve some personal items for her.
To Delphine [6:33]: Sure. U can give the keys back to her too.
To Delphine [6:33]: Do u need them tonight? I'm home now so u can drop by whenever.
From Delphine [6:35]: Yes, thank you. I will let you know when I leave here.
To Delphine [6:35]: OK
From Delphine [7:27]: Leaving now. I'll see you soon. 20h at the latest.
To Delphine [7:27]: Drive safely!

* *

Uncertainty zipped between them in the initial contact of their gazes when Shay answered the door. Shay tried to repress the impulse within herself, having told herself during the wait for Delphine's arrival with the repetition of a mantra that nothing had changed, but the disquiet reared up reflected in Delphine's eyes. They hadn't spoken directly in person since Sunday. When they had communicated, Shay had felt and read the pauses and the vacillations in their electronic messages, the exploratory prods at the borders of topics new and old that felt both fragile and impregnable, as if all the solid rules had the unpredictable elasticity of jelly.

But the woman on the other side of the door was just Delphine—if drawn in expression and posture, and yet statuesque and arresting nonetheless.

Shay smiled. "Hey."

The line of Delphine's shoulders relaxed. The muscles around Shay's mouth eased in response.

"Hey," Delphine said, leaning forward to greet Shay with customary kisses.

Routine. Habits. Shay knew the comfort and reassurance they lent.

"Do you want to come in?" Shay asked. "Are you hungry? I made eggplant with basil. I just finished cooking and haven't eaten yet."

Delphine hesitated, thoughts churning behind her eyes, suspicion projecting from their depths. "Is there enough for two?"

"There's enough for two," Shay confirmed, pulling the door open wider.

"I didn't bring anything," Delphine warned, or complained, as she stepped inside.

"That's never a requirement," Shay said with a laugh in her voice. "Besides, there's still a whole selection of wine left from all the other times you came bearing 'something.'"

Delphine indulged in a smirk as she doffed coat and bags. Shay left Delphine beside the coat rack and retreated into the kitchen to prepare the promised two servings, calling out, "How are you? What do you want to drink?"

Delphine laughed softly, the effect almost sad. "If you ask like that it makes the two sound related, like the state of my health needs a glass of wine to help it."

"You can ask for water," pointed out Shay.

"Would water reflect better on my mental state?"

"No. I meant—" Shay shook her head and choked off a giggle of exasperation. "You know what I meant. You don't have to ask for wine, you can ask for water—whatever your mood is."
Delphine sidled up to the end of the dining table, smiling. "What wine is available?"

"Take a look," Shay urged Delphine, gesturing to the shelf space that Shay had dedicated to house the accumulated bottles that, by this point, spoke mostly to Delphine's taste and distinction. The command raised Delphine's eyebrows. Delphine joined Shay at the kitchen counter, but only to wordlessly hold her hands out toward the bowl Shay was filling with steamed rice. Shay refused the help with a thrust of her chin to indicate the collection of wine. Delphine smiled in resigned acquiescence and turned to her assigned task.

Delphine's height made the perusal an easier endeavor than it usually was for Shay. Delphine contemplated the labels, pulling some bottles down for study and shifting others to get a peek at the ones behind, and settled on a bottle sitting half empty. "Let's finish this one. I'll get the glasses."

Shay glanced over from the kitchen table. "It's white. Are you sure?"

"Something light tonight," Delphine declared, pulling down two glasses from the opposite end of the shelf. It wasn't normally a chore Shay would burden her guests to undertake, but it wasn't the first time Delphine had done so. The first time had been at Shay's request—Shay couldn't remember the circumstances now, why she'd been indisposed, why she should have needed to ask, could only know for certain that it had been permissive—for Delphine, for herself. So that making subsequent requests had come easier, more frequently, until Delphine expected Shay to issue them, then presumed they needn't be issued, meaning that now when Shay glanced over her shoulder, seeing Delphine taking down wine glasses was comfortable.

It was still comfortable.

Shay had worried.

She'd worried about a lot since Sunday.

Shay cleared her throat subtly. "Can you grab napkins, too? I'll get the utensils."

"Of course," Delphine replied and tore off two plys from the paper roll without hesitation or subsequent direction. In short order the table was set and they took seats diagonally from each other, which was the roomiest manner to sit across from one another at the slender table. Taking full command of wine duties, Delphine poured out two glasses while Shay helped herself to the rice first, then waited for Delphine to spoon her portion.

Delphine smiled around her first bite. "It's good."

"It's a Thai dish."

"It's delicious. Thank you."

Shay shuffled a clump of rice across her plate and dodged the compliment by avoiding Delphine's eyes. Because the way Delphine was looking at her was soft, eroded by the rasp of exhaustion that suffused the gratitude with an earnestness that felt inappropriate to accept for a simple meal. (And less than a week had passed for Shay's mind to recalibrate from Alex's visit and the perspective shift engendered by all the events of the weekend and Shay remained unsure where the equilibrium of her adjusted normal would plateau.) Easier to recount the steps to prepare the dish, apologize for the lack of a wok that would have improved the results, and keep the conversation inconsequential as they ate. Delphine obliged with minimal responses, but with warmth in her efforts.

Shay wondered if they'd both have preferred silence but were wary of inviting strain—and yet leery of saying too much. She found herself at times poking at vegetables in momentary absence of
Delphine refilled their glasses when the lines—meniscus, Shay imagined Delphine clarifying if Shay had voiced it—dipped low and seemed almost distracted by the bottle. She fixated on the label, peering at it speculatively where it sat near at hand, until Shay asked, "Is there a novel on the label or are you having trouble reading it?" In a more concerned tone, she asked, "Are your eyes okay?"

"My eyes are fine. I can read it," Delphine claimed lightly. "Did I buy this?"

Shay smiled. "Yes, you bought it."

"I don't remember," Delphine confessed softly.

"Did you expect to remember? Were you keeping track of the wines you've bought?"

"No. Not exactly," Delphine's lips twitched. "Do you want to know a secret?"

"Another one?" Shay asked, without forethought.

Delphine hesitated, but said, "Yes. The most revealing one yet." Delphine moistened her lips and leaned forward. "I developed a very advanced and efficient system to select the wine I brought here."

"Yeah?"

"Yes," Delphine said earnestly. "It is a three-step process that worked like this: I would go to the section with wine, I would stand before the display, and I would choose the label I did not recognize."

Shay smiled, wryness wriggling free. "That . . . scientific, huh?"

"Like any good methodology, it is highly replicable and repeatable," Delphine declared.

"So you're saying . . . it's never been about taste or quality or preference?"

Delphine spread her hands. "I'm saying that one bottle from California is no different to me from another bottle from California."

Shay laughed. "They're not all from California!"

"They're not," Delphine agreed, "but many are."

Shay shook her head. "Your method is flawed if you can't remember what you've already bought."

"That," Delphine said, puncturing the air with a finger, "is bad marketing. The company made neither the wine nor the label memorable."

"Although," Shay countered, "that could work to their advantage in this scenario. If you're buying wine based on the criteria of purchasing from a different vineyard each time and you don't remember if you've bought a certain brand before, there's a chance you'll buy it again."

"That's very true," Delphine allowed. "And, to be honest, I don't think you or I would notice the difference."

"You're saying my tastes have no distinction?" Shay quipped archly.

"I think that a continual influx of wine makes you more concerned about consuming it than critiquing
"It's good to remember the awful ones, though," Shay said. "You don't want to be stuck with a whole bottle of something you didn't enjoy the first time around."

Delphine raised an eyebrow. "You've never mentioned that any were awful."

"Because apparently we've been really lucky so far," Shay exclaimed. "I thought you knew what you were doing, but it turns out you just have the favor of the wine gods."

"The wine gods," Delphine murmured with a little smile.

"Sure—Dionysus, Bacchus, take your pick."

Delphine hid her expression behind the pretense of taking a sip of wine and lowered the glass to reveal a wistful smile. "When was the last time I brought you a bottle of wine?"

Shay shook her head, her own mouth pulled into a smile. "We haven't depleted the reserves yet."

"No, we haven't," Delphine concurred in a soft voice.

"You okay?" Shay asked gently.

"Tired," Delphine said with a frankness that caught Shay off guard.

"That's not surprising. Do you need help gathering things for Cosima?"

Delphine held up a hand with a slight shake of her head. "How are you? Have you been feeling ill at all?"

Shay paused, unsure what had happened, the levity produced by their wine exchange evaporating. Brow furrowed, she asked, "Are we . . . not going to talk about Cosima?"

"What?" Delphine asked, the confusion in her voice echoed in her gaze. Comprehension dawned shortly. "Ah. I see. No. I—you asked me how I'm doing, so I want to know how you're doing." Her words rushed out faster, flirting with flustered, perhaps a measure of Delphine's exhaustion. "I felt that if I answered your question, the opportunity would get lost to ask about you."

Shay nodded slowly, partly to mask the churning of her thoughts at the unexpected explanation. "The good news is that I don't feel sick. But just in case I've been taking elderberry extract since you warned me. It can't hurt anyway."

"Elderberry?"

"You might have heard it called sambucus or sambucol. Some findings say the extract helps reduce flu symptoms."

"You've tried this before?" Delphine asked—cautiously, admirably avoiding a note of skepticism. Shay flashed a reserved smile. "Nothing says it prevents the flu, but it doesn't hurt. It's really sweet. Would you like to try it?"

"No, thank you."

"You could take some to Cosima," Shay suggested lightly.
"Her symptoms are greatly reduced," Delphine said. "In fact, we plan to discharge her tomorrow."

Shay didn't hide her surprise. "That's good, right?"

Delphine nodded in an air of distraction. "She's doing well."

"You're not excited," Shay noted gently.

Delphine breathed out heavily. "I would prefer to keep her under observation a bit longer, but Cosima doesn't share that view and I don't have a enough grounds to argue against it."

"Okay," Shay said slowly in consideration. "Does she need a ride?"

Delphine shook her head. "I will offer to take her home. That way I can also make sure she's situated."

"Will you need any help?"

Delphine shook her head again, but her gaze lay upon Shay with shrewdness. "No, but I thought you would like to know."

Shay absorbed her words, trying to divine implications. "Are we going to be able to talk about Cosima?"

Delphine ran her fingertips along the base of her wine glass. "How do you mean? Are we not talking about her now?"


Delphine dropped her gaze to the curvature of the glass. "You and Cosima have to determine what is between you and Cosima."

"Okay," Shay said measuredly. "But that doesn't address what you and I talk about between us. Would you feel better if we don't talk about her at all?"

Delphine's mouth dipped at the corners. She glanced at Shay, then back down at her glass. "Would that be easier?"

"I'm asking you," Shay pointed out. "I don't—I don't want you to feel backed into a corner. And I don't want you to feel obligated to talk to me as your friend if you need to protect Cosima as your patient. I get that, Delphine. I do."

Delphine did not lift her gaze. "Cosima is your friend. Of course you would be concerned."

Shay checked a sigh.

"I'm not asking you to choose, Shay," Delphine said quietly.

"Between you and Cosima?" Shay shook her head. "Do I have to? Is that a thing? Because I've never felt that way." She paused, seeing Delphine on the verge of a frown. "You've always been careful when it came to Cosima—I knew that. I followed your lead. If you don't want that to change —" Shay took a short breath. "—that's okay."

"I'm sorry," Delphine muttered.

"For what?"
Delphine raised her eyes, those gradated irises, which offered a study that Shay often tried to ignore, troubled now, and uncertain. "I don't know. For bringing this to your door."

"You mean Cosima?" Shay smiled. "Cosima made her choices. You didn't have any control over that."

"I could have been influential," Delphine mumbled.

Shay stifled a titter. "In what way? Like you could have steered Cosima away? How?" Shay indulged in an incredulous smile and felt, for a second, the atmosphere realign into familiar patterns. "By telling her to stay away? Or by telling her to do the things you didn't want her to do?"

Startlement brightened Delphine's gaze, then receded as her mouth twitched in contemplation of a laugh that never emerged. "I see your point." Delphine reached up and massaged her brow. "I didn't realize . . ."

Delphine didn't complete the thought. Shay prompted, "Yeah?"

Delphine glanced at her, then dropped her hand to the table and played with the edge of her napkin. "I never knew how Cosima discussed me with you. I didn't realize you had acquired that sort of impression—of how Cosima sees me."

Shay sipped at the remainder of her portion of wine and set the glass down gently. "She's not your biggest fan."

Delphine chuckled at a low frequency, mouth stretched in a smile. "No, I don't think she is."

"I don't think she hates you, though," Shay said with cautious delivery. "I think you confuse her."

"Confuse her," echoed Delphine in a mutter, lips jerking her smile into cynical before it faded. Gaze still cast upon the task of twisting the edges of the napkin into thin spindles, Delphine asked, "Does that confuse you?"

"It did sometimes," Shay acknowledged.

"Do I confuse you?"

Shay slipped into a grin that listed sideways. "Do I confuse you? All the time, right? Cosima's probably less confusing to you than I am on a regular basis."

Delphine's eyes darted to Shay's face, but no laughter or amusement lightened the flat, concentrated consideration of Shay. Fatigue hung at the corners of Delphine's eyes and dullness blunted the usual sharpness of her perspicacity, which might have slowed her response but likely ultimately led her to say, "You didn't answer my question."

There was no teasing in Delphine's tone.

Shay summoned a smile that she hope appeared soft and projected ease. "My point was that we all confuse each other sometimes. No one can understand someone else perfectly." Shay licked her lips. "I feel like I shouldn't take up your time when you've gotten an early night off."

For one discernible second Delphine's expression slipped—falling or sagging—but reconstituted with a breaking of their eye contact into a fatigued understanding before Shay could reliably parse what she'd seen. Reaching for her plate, Delphine said, "You're probably right."
"You can leave it," Shay assured her guest, getting to her feet. "Let me get Cosima's keys for you."

Delphine hesitated, plate levered a millimeter off the table's surface. "Are you sure? You made dinner. Clearing the dishes is the least I could do."

"You're my guest," Shay said on her way to retrieve Cosima's ring of keys from the hook by the door. "And you've already had a long week. You've earned a little rest." Shay backtracked to Delphine's side and held the keys out to Delphine, who took them without comment. Shay rested her hand upon Delphine's shoulder and squeezed. "Be easy on yourself. You're getting Cosima home tomorrow. It's okay to feel good about that."

A rueful smile pulled up one side of Delphine's mouth as she contemplated the sparse ring of keys. "Cosima is seeing to it that she gets home tomorrow. Remember, I'd keep her longer if I could."

Shay released Delphine and stuck her hands into the back pockets of her pants. "Isn't it better that she has the energy to defy you rather than not?"

Delphine lifted her gaze to Shay's face. "You're going to keep looking for a silver lining, aren't you?"

Shay smiled. "There's gotta be something you'll believe that'll make you feel better, right?"

Tension that had sat unnoticed at the corners of Delphine's mouth eased away. "I already do." She stood and stepped close to press a kiss to Shay's cheek. "Thank you for dinner."

Shay held herself still for a second before reaching out to gently wrap her arms around Delphine. "You're welcome."

Slowly but surely Delphine reached around to hold Shay fast and close.

Shay's heart lurched.

In the clutch of their embrace Delphine exhaled heavily.

Shay closed her eyes against a sadness that welled up within her ribs. As if no longer forced to face Delphine, Shay had no choice but to confront the sense of all the unvoiced and unbroached and unexplored topics, all the nebulous notions and emotions she hadn't yet sorted, all the burdens Delphine kept out of her view and cognizance—trapped in the too small space between them, a circumscription inadequate to contain their intangible enormity, and yet an effort Shay knew she and Delphine were making. Valiantly? Vainly? The unspeakable pressed back against their containment. Lurking. It was all Shay could do to pull together a veneer of composure when she felt Delphine pull away.

Keeping her gaze downcast to avoid Delphine's eyes—and by extension Delphine's powers of discernment—Shay said, "Will you let me know if you need any help tomorrow? I should be free after work."

"I will," Delphine said in a soft exhalation.

Shay didn't hear it as a promise, but when Shay raised her head she thought she glimpsed a glimmer in Delphine's eyes yearning to telegraph it was.
Full disclosure: I do not have the next update ready. I've tried my best to stay at least one update ahead of myself in terms of having a workable rough draft, but I've caught up and am "behind." Updates may slow and/or become inconsistent from this point forward.
Chapter 35

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Cosima held Delphine to her agreement, but Delphine delayed discharging her patient until later in the afternoon. She ushered Cosima through a battery of tests and scans that pushed Cosima to snap midway, "Is this punishment for wanting to get out of here?"

Petty vengeance held no place in Delphine's agenda, but the ordeal, which would have been tediously humdrum and conducted without incident a week earlier, strained the limits of Cosima's stamina and endurance. Cosima was shaky on her feet, shaky in reclining and sitting up, shaky (and stubborn to assert independence) transferring from apparatus to wheelchair and then again vice versa. So much so that upon the schedule's completion Delphine regarded Cosima with crossed arms and nibbled at the end of one thumb nail.

"You promised," Cosima said lowly from the depths of the wheelchair in which she sagged. In an honest assessment, Delphine acknowledged to herself that Cosima was stronger than Delphine predicted she would be based on her state the day before, but the wheelchair had been necessary for transport across the considerable distances between machinery. The fact presaged difficulties in leaving Cosima to her own devices.

"I didn't promise," Delphine hedged. "You realize why you have to say that?"

"Yeah, because the socialized signals of disapproval displayed on your face are recognizable to the working eyes in my head," Cosima said. She adjusted the lay of her glasses on the bridge of her nose. "Not perfect, but working."

"You will not reconsider? One more day? Recovering from the flu is no small ordeal."

"Tomorrow it'll be one more day and the day after that it'll be one more day and then the day after that . . ." drawled Cosima. "Maybe you didn't promise, but you said it would be today, Dr. Cormier."

Delphine nodded. That was what she'd said.

For better or worse, fulfilling her end of the bargain happened without delay or consultation, without paperwork, without bureaucratic hoops, without concerns for liability or lawsuits. The procedure was merely a matter of Cosima exchanging flimsy hospital gown for warm layers of clothing, coat, and a beanie that Delphine had gathered as per instructions and delivered, packing up personal effects, including the blanket folded neatly for conveyance, bidding thanks and farewells to the nurses, and being wheeled out to Delphine's waiting car with a tank of supplemental oxygen. Cosima slipped readily into the passenger seat. Orienting herself and reaching for the handle of the passenger door, Cosima noticed Delphine reach for the locks on the wheelchair and said, "Leave it."

Delphine paused. "Whether or not we use it today, I'll feel better knowing it's on hand. It could be kept in your apartment."

"I don't want it."

"For my peace of mind, Cosima," Delphine said, not hard or forcefully. No contentious spirit stirred in Delphine's breast. She wasn't arguing. "Consider it a condition of letting you return so soon against my better judgment."
Obstinacy settled in a furrow between Cosima's brows. "Hey, you never mentioned conditions."

"I'm mentioning one now," Delphine said blithely as she twisted levers. "Think of it as doctor's orders. Or appropriating DYAD property. Stealing, if you prefer."

The deepening furrow of Cosima's brow broadcasted the formulation of additional objections, but her gaze narrowed on Delphine, unsure, momentarily at a lost. What emerged as Delphine managed to coerce the wheelchair to fold was a curt, "Whatever." Cosima shut the door.

Delphine stowed the wheelchair and oxygen tank in the trunk. They set off. In stony silence. Despite the fact that they were fulfilling Cosima's express wish, displeasure radiated from the passenger seat.

Delphine felt that circumstances could be proceeding better, but her reason couldn't determine if the sentiment held any rational truth.

About halfway to their destination, Delphine inquired, "Are there any necessities you'd like to pick up?"

Cosima, gazing out the passenger window, broke into a slow smile. "You offering to be my personal shopper, Dr. Cormier?"

"Since we're out, it would be convenient to get anything you need now."

"Nah, I should be good," Cosima said. "It hasn't been that long—my fridge shouldn't be a mold farm."

The unpleasant image evinced a wince from Delphine.

"If everything has gone fungal hyphae," Cosima continued, "I can always order delivery from the nearby restaurants—a perk of the area that Shay never mentioned." Cosima rubbed her forefinger and thumb together. "Maybe she doesn't use it much."

Delphine was quiet for the length between traffic lights, then said, "Shay would probably appreciate hearing from you that you're home."

Cosima looked over sharply. "Are you saying that I should let her know?"

"She already knows," Delphine said softly. "I explained to her why I needed your keys. I'm saying that hearing from you will mean more than hearing it from me."

"You're telling me to reach out to Shay," Cosima parsed with the caution of testing the temperature of a body of water.

"Yes."

Cosima's eyes narrowed. "Are you feeling okay? Feverish? Achey?"

"I feel fine, thank you," Delphine said, unruffled.

"Are you a clone?" Cosima fired back. "Am I speaking to Delphine Cormier?"

"Cosima," Delphine said with restrained impatience. Her tone seemed to relax Cosima.

Cosima turned to gaze back out the window. "I have to return her blanket anyway."

Luck granted them a stretch of vacant curbside parking fairly close to the building. When Delphine
put the vehicle in park and killed the engine, Cosima said, "Leave the wheelchair. I don't need it."

Delphine turned to face Cosima head-on. "You don't have to prove anything to me, Cosima."

"I'm not proving anything to you," Cosima said, a flare of anger sparking in her tone.

Delphine paused. "Alright."

Cosima flung open the door with all her stirred irritation, gripped the edges of the door frame, and hauled herself to her feet without assistance. Delphine watched from the driver's seat as Cosima gripped the door like a railing, inched to its end, and unceremoniously slammed it shut. Delphine climbed out and hop-stepped around the front of the car to catch up with Cosima. The pair of them walked, slowly, with Delphine close at Cosima's side matching her step for step, from the car to the entrance, where Delphine rushed ahead to hold open the door, and from the door to the elevator, where Cosima leaned against the back wall, and from the elevator down the hall to Cosima's door, where Cosima braced herself against the corridor wall.

Delphine fished out Cosima's keys from her coat pocket. Cosima reclaimed them with a rueful twist to her lips.

"Did you make a copy?" Cosima asked.

Delphine hesitated. "No. But having one would be helpful in the future."

Cosima smirked. "It did surprise me that that wasn't a condition of my taking the apartment in the first place." She eyed Delphine. "Are you going to make that a condition now?"

Delphine shook her head. "No. But since you've mentioned it, let me put in a formal request for a copy. If you're willing."

"Meaning I can say no?"

"I would prefer not having to knock down the door or break into your apartment in the event of an emergency, but yes, you can refuse."

Cosima's eyes narrowed. "Has anyone told you that you're not very good at your job?"

Delphine glanced down at the tips of her shoes. "I don't think you've said it in explicit terms before. If you have, I don't remember."

"You know," Cosima said as she inserted the key into the lock, "when you didn't ask for a copy of the key, I figured you were going to ask eventually or that you already had some way to get in. I mean, my ex picked the lock on my last door—why shouldn't you be able to?"

"I was not taught how to pick locks," Delphine clarified.

"Tell me for real, Dr. Cormier," Cosima said in a cadence bordering on singsong as she pushed her door open, "is there an official monitor training course?"

"If there is," Delphine said, "I was not matriculated."

"That might explain some things," Cosima said with a bit of cheer as she shuffled inside. When Cosima glanced over at Delphine and discovered no sign of response via word or expression, disappointment clouded Cosima's mien. "You don't seem quite yourself today, Dr. Cormier."

Trailing Cosima but dawdling within proximity of the door, Delphine asked without inflection or
"Should I be more defensive or more silent?"

"Ouch," Cosima muttered. But she smirked. "That sounds closer to usual, though."

Delphine's mouth twitched in a tic adjacent to a frown. Cosima, spying it, waited. Delphine's cell phone dinged. Delphine checked it.

From Shay [17:30]: R u and Cosima back?

"Shay," announced Delphine. "She's asking if we're here."

"Impeccable timing," Cosima remarked as she made her way to the kitchen faucet while Delphine typed a reply.

To Shay [17:30]: Yes. Just arrived.

"Genuine question," Cosima said as she pulled down a drinking glass. "Do you think Shay is actually as nice as she seems or is it an affectation she puts on?"

From Shay [17:31]: Everything ok? I'm about to leave work. R u hungry? Would u 2 like rice porridge?

"She's asking if you're hungry and if you'd like to have rice porridge," Delphine relayed nonchalantly. Cosima's movements stilled. "I'll tell her not to trouble herself. So she can take a break from the act."

To Shay [17:31]: We are fine. No need to trouble yourself.

From Shay [17:32]: It's done already. I made it in a slow cooker. It's vegetarian tho. I'm not sure u will like it, tbh.

The corners of Delphine's mouth dipped in consideration. "The rice porridge is already made."

From Shay [17:32]: If it hasn't turned to mush. I've never tried it before.

From Shay [17:32]: But it said it would take 8 hours to cook!

From Shay [17:33]: I can tell u how it turned out when I get home.

From Shay [17:33]: OK leaving

"She's on her way home," Delphine informed Cosima. She bid Shay a safe drive and tucked away her phone. "Knowing Shay, she won't come up unless you invite her."

Cosima stood silently by the faucet and sipped at a glass of water. Setting it down, she announced, "I've been dying to wash up."

Delphine crossed her arms and nodded. "Could you keep the door unlocked? Please."

Cosima hesitated. "Yeah." She gestured to indicate the kitchen area. "Feel free to help yourself." She smirked. "Feel free to disinfect the place, too."

Delphine watched, at first with a pretense of discretion, then in open observation, as Cosima tottered around the space, unbuckling and pulling off and setting down bracelets and rings, and discarding her flowy blouse to leave her in a camisole. She carried a folded towel from the closet into the bathroom and tossed out another one once she was inside. The door closed. Some time thereafter water roared through the pipes.

Delphine stood abandoned with no inclination to move. She took a step uncertainly inward, then
another, drifting first through the kitchen, then redirected herself deeper into the apartment, keenly aware that she was roaming unattended the sanctum of her subject. Her eyes picked out details involuntarily—Cosima's choices in decor, the earthy color scheme, the books on the nightstand, the pile of literature growing towards mountainous in a corner, the haphazard negligence of discarded clothes, the abundance of knickknacks, the absence of photographs, the boxes opened but unpacked with one baring its cargo of hardbound books—and was surprised by none of the details.

Delphine could have opened drawers, rifled through the articles in the closet, peeked into boxes, poked for hiding spots under the mattress or inside a book. Snooped. For what? (What would Aldous ask her to look for? Something pertaining to Sarah Manning? A written outline of the clones' plans? The password of Cosima's email account? A diary? Some elucidating key object Delphine had no idea existed?) To what end? Delphine had a notion how that concluded for Cosima's previous monitor.

One familiar object stood out. Delphine ran her fingers down the spine: *Neolution: The New Science of Self-Directed Evolution*. She took up the hardcover edition and turned it over in her hands. Here Aldous was, sitting in the room with her. Volume in hand, Delphine settled into a high back chair. Her eyes skimmed familiar sentences, Delphine had read them already, but in that apartment they felt foreign. To recognition. In philosophy.

Perhaps it was Delphine who had become foreign to the argument.

Or their author.

A single page turn revealed the addition of a second mind. Highlighters had brightened a number of passages, pens had scrawled through white space, a notably steady and sure hand had dashed decisive lines beneath certain words and boxed in phrases. Delphine paused. Ignoring the typeface text, Delphine leafed through the chapters. Marginalia crept down the edges of the pages in neat blocky handwriting. Delphine parsed words unintentionally, cognition deriving meaning from patterns before she could stop herself, and soon found her attention engaged in earnest as the commentary spilled out not a screed, but a conversation, a grappling with Neolution's proposals, tenets, visions, and the mind who presented them. Flashes of anger, incredulity, and cynicism flared here and there, but the countless iterations of question marks spoke overall to curiosity.

Could Delphine and Cosima have engaged with one another on such a level?

The chime of Delphine's cell phone pierced the disarming fantasy.

From Shay [18:09]: Home.
From Shay [18:09]: The porridge isn't mush!
From Shay [18:09]: R u guys hungry?

Delphine smiled.

To Shay [18:10]: Cosima is washing up right now. She didn't answer one way or another when I asked her earlier.
From Shay [18:11]: Well. I can return her slippers at least. She might want those. She's still washing up? I'll run them up real quick right now.

Delphine shook her head—and noticed the silence in the apartment. No running water. Delphine stalled too long debating whether to update Shay or dissuade her altogether or advise her to wait and concluded that Shay was probably halfway to the next floor. Delphine got up, replaced *Neolution* where she'd found it, and was moving toward the door when the timid knock tapped out a furtive burst.
"Hello," Delphine said with mild cheer as she opened the door.

"Hey," Shay greeted her in haste, holding up a pair of slippers. "Can you give these to Cosima?"

"Give what to me?"

Delphine and Shay turned toward Cosima's voice. In the doorway of the bathroom stood Cosima swaddled in a bathrobe.

"Your slippers," Shay said, lifting them up high. "They've been at my place since—" Shay floundered, apologetic. "Delphine said you were washing up, so I thought I would drop them off while you were occupied so that I wouldn't bother you if . . ." Shay's brow furrowed with reluctance to continue, but smoothed as Shay took a deep breath. "Are you hungry? Would you like to have congee—rice porridge? I made some. I can bring it up if you'd like."

Cosima wrapped her arms around her middle and leaned against the doorframe. At last she said, "Yeah. Sure. Thanks. Do you mind if I get dressed first?"

"I'll help you carry it up," Delphine said to Shay. Addressing Cosima, she said, "We'll take our time."

Cosima waved them off.

Delphine touched Shay's elbow to prod her into movement.

Shay left the slippers by the door.

* *

On the way downstairs Shay was dimly aware that Delphine snuck surreptitious glances at her, but what Delphine saw remained as unvoiced as her friend's withheld counsel. Shay reassured herself that she felt fairly composed. Until they stood in her kitchen.

"What am I doing?" Shay moaned, bowing her face into her hands. "Why am I being such a spazz?"

The hands that wrapped around Shay's wrists were gentle.

"Hey," Delphine breathed, bearing down lightly on her hold to lower Shay's hands. "What's wrong?"

Shay looked away, shaking her head. "I told myself to act normal and—I didn't."

"You did somewhat aggressively push Cosima to accept a homemade meal," Delphine concurred in a low, soft voice.

Shay fended off a groan and turned to Delphine with a pained expression. A faint smile lingered on Delphine's lips, the laughter around her eyes an indication she'd been teasing. But there was no denying truth inhabited Delphine's words.

Shay sighed. "I did, didn't I? That's not what I wanted to do. I just—I didn't expect to see her and I was trying not to intrude if she didn't want to see me and—I got caught and it just spilled out. But I didn't want her to feel pressured to say yes."

"Why would she say no?" Delphine asked, puzzlement tightening her features.

"Because the person making the offer acted like such a weirdo?" Shay supplied.
"Ah. Yes. I can see how that would make someone doubt the quality of the food." Delphine's eyes sparkled.

Shay rolled her eyes. "Can you be serious for a second?"

Delphine released Shay's captured wrists, amusement receding into gravity. "I think Cosima understands."

"That's the problem," Shay said in a hush. "She knows I'm acting weird because I know she's sick—and the reason I know isn't because she told me. So I don't—" Shay exhaled sharply. "I don't know what Cosima expects from me. I don't know how I should act."

"She doesn't want your pity," Delphine said softly.

"I know," Shay hissed, covering her face again. She dropped her hands in frustration. "That's not the impression I want to give her. Is that what this looks like?"

Delphine crossed her arms. "Is that what this is?"

"No," Shay said but her assertion lacked a degree of confidence.

"I know," Delphine assured her, with a nod of agreement. "You would have done the same if Cosima had only had the flu."

Shay frowned. "Is this too much?"

A second of genuine contemplation crossed Delphine's features that concluded with a shrug. "The rice porridge is made. How did it turn out?"

"I went light on the salt," admitted Shay. "I thought maybe that would be best? But more can be added, to taste."

Delphine smiled and checked the clock on the wall. "Let's give Cosima more time."

They sent a text message ahead when they packed up the slow cooker—"We could take just the stoneware pot." "Is it hot?" "Yeah." "I feel there's a higher risk of dropping that if you have to carry it with—what are they called?" "Oven mitts? Pot holders? To protect your hands?" "Yes. Those."

"Ah, yeah, I see what you mean."—and the tupperware containers of chopped scallions and coriander leaves—"You really prepared everything." "Well, yeah?"—and knocked at the door when they arrived.

"Door's open!" Cosima called to them.

Cosima sat cross-legged upon her bed, comfortable in yoga pants and long sleeves, laptop open before her. She took in the sight of them entering laden with meal items and said, "No balloons? No flowers?"

Shay felt Delphine's hand alight on her elbow, ostensibly to guide her toward a cleared space of counter near an electrical outlet, but Delphine's touch also served as a reminder of her friend's presence at her side. Shay set down the crockpot with care, which turned her back to Cosima, but she glanced over her shoulder to say, "I forgot the black pepper, too."

Cosima's reaction manifested at a delay, but the tug of her muscles in the direction of a smile was detectable. "The pepper mill should be over there somewhere."
"Should I bring a bowl over to you?" Shay asked. The dining table Cosima had considered when she'd moved in hadn't moved beyond theoretical.

"Dinner party in my bed?" Cosima asked.

"Sure," Shay said, looking around briefly for bowls. Delphine located them first. Cosima, watching, directed them to the ladle in the basket of other cooking utensils. Shay ladled out modest portions, garnished with greens, and held the pepper mill poised above the first bowl. "Are you okay with pepper?"

"Hit me up," Cosima said. "There's sriracha in the fridge."

"Sriracha? In congee?" Shay asked.

"Oh yeah, it's delicious," Cosima said.

"Do you want sriracha?" Shay asked.

"Bring the bottle over," Cosima agreed.

Shay plundered the refrigerator for the red bottle while Delphine managed to procure spoons. Shay conveyed bottle and steaming bowl of porridge to Cosima. "Careful, it's hot."

"The congee is brown?" Cosima asked as she took the bowl from Shay.

"Mushrooms," Shay explained. "It's vegetarian congee. I know mushrooms aren't your favorite thing, but it's for flavor."

Cosima nodded slowly and squeezed out a swirl of sriracha that, mixed in, lent the porridge a reddish hue.

Shay retrieved a bowl and joined Cosima, perching on the edge of the bed. Delphine toted her bowl to a high backed chair in the corner that faced them. Cosima sat stirring her spoon through the porridge and watching Shay. Shay stared back.

A small noise of consideration from Delphine's corner drew both of their attention. Delphine sucked at her lips, nodding to herself, and said, "I wasn't sure what to expect because I've never had this. It has ginger." She paused. "I was glad to discover that was ginger."

Cosima smirked. She snuck a glance at Shay through her lashes and then scooped up a spoonful that she blew on gently before tentatively plunging it into her mouth. Shay followed suit. Cosima took a second, more probing sample.

Shay watched expectantly.

Cosima's mouth contorted through a series of successive uncertainties.

"How is it?" Shay asked.

"Well. I mean." Cosima avoided Shay's eyes. "Did you forget salt?"

Delphine laughed.

Salt was procured—"Adding fish sauce is also really good," Shay supplied, which made Cosima
smile and remark, "Because it's basically salt"—and stirred in by cautious, miserly amounts. The meal proceeded mostly in silence but for the clink of spoons against ceramic. They each more or less occupied her own space of thought. Delphine finished first, quietly got to her feet, bore her bowl to the sink, passed the sponge over it, rinsed, and set it aside in the drying rack. With little willingness to look elsewhere, Shay and Cosima watched her perform the simple ritual, then as Delphine checked her phone and frowned.

"Excuse me a moment," Delphine announced. "I have to run an errand. I'll be back soon."

"You don't have to come back," Cosima countered.

Delphine glanced at Cosima, then at Shay. She smiled at Shay. "Soon."

When the door closed behind Delphine, Cosima asked, "Where do you think she's off to?"

Shay shook her head.

"Not even a guess?" Cosima prodded. "Like maybe she remembered she had a date? Or maybe she needs to restock on hair products? Or maybe she's off to report to the corporate overlords?"

"Corporate overlords?" Shay asked. "Is that what you think of your bosses?"

Cosima smiled tightly. "Some of them could make Darth Vader look like the boss of the year. Delphine knows."

"Well," Shay said, "I don't want to talk about Delphine."

"No?" Cosima asked, studying the path her spoon cut through the rice porridge. "I think she's a fascinating topic for discussion."

While that was true, Shay said, "I was hoping we could talk about . . . something different. About what happened between us."

"Nothing happened between us," Cosima said, tone hardening toward diamond.

Shay took a steadying breath. "I don't mean what happened . . . Thursday. I meant . . ." Shay trailed off and hung her head.

Cosima watched her. "Say it."

Shay lifted her gaze. "I want to talk about you. About . . . your health."

Cosima leaned back. "What do you want me to say? I'm sorry I didn't tell you about this extremely personal and private detail about my life?"

"No," Shay said, shaking head. "I mean that now that I know—if you're okay with the fact that I know."

Cosima's eyes narrowed on her in speculation. "What do you know? Or what do you think you know?"

"You're . . . not one hundred percent healthy," Shay said quietly. "In what way I don't really know, except that maybe it affects your lungs."

Cosima glanced away. "Yeah, sorry about coughing all over you."
Shay shook her head to put aside the trivial point. "I know that Delphine's your doctor."

Cosima's lips curled into a vicious smile. "Yeah."

They both dwelled in silence, Shay with nothing more to add because she didn't know more, Cosima far away.

"About Thursday," Cosima said abruptly. "What I did was presumptuous. I didn't mean to put you on the spot like that. I'm sorry."

"You already apologized," Shay said softly.

"You mean when I was delirious?" Cosima asked, skeptical.

"Actually, it kinda felt sincere exactly for that reason," Shay said with an exhalation of a laugh.

"You didn't say anything afterward," Cosima pointed out. "Not Friday, not Saturday, not Sunday."

"I thought we both needed space," Shay said carefully. "And I was busy over the weekend."

"You weren't angry?" Cosima asked, observing Shay intently.

"I wasn't angry."

"It's okay if you were angry," Cosima said. "You don't have to pretend otherwise."

"I wasn't angry," Shay reiterated. She focused on the wall behind Cosima. "Surprised, yeah, maybe confused, but . . . not angry. Not at you."

"Shay, look at me," Cosima commanded in a soft voice. Shay shifted to gaze at Cosima. Cosima conducted a careful study of Shay's face. "I had the flu this weekend."

Shay nodded. "I know."

Cosima's eyebrows pinched toward one another. "Delphine told you?"

"Not directly," Shay said. "She warned me to be on the lookout for flu symptoms."

Cosima smirked. "That was thoughtful of her."

"In my experience, she can be," Shay said.

"Yeah, but not in the way of 'make dinner for my sick neighbor,'" Cosima said lightly.

Shay nodded slowly. "I can't say one way or another if that's true."

"Why?" Cosima asked. "Because you think she'd make dinner for you if you got sick?"

Shay shook her head slowly. "I don't know if she'd do that. I don't know if she wouldn't. I meant that I had no evidence to support one claim versus the other."

"Evidence," Cosima breathed, eyes dropping momentarily in amusement. Cosima shook her head, then lifted her gaze. "But you're that type of person. The one who makes soup for someone sick. Like those chocolate chip cookies. If it weren't for those cookies, I'd be sitting here thinking this was a pity party."

Shay dropped her gaze, to dodge Cosima's scrutiny.
"I do have a serious health issue," Cosima said. Shay's head snapped up. "It's an autoimmune disease that affects my epithelial tissue. Yeah, it's in my lungs. Other organs, too." Cosima paused, thoughtful. "It's rare. And not contagious." She refocused on Shay. "Now you know."

They sat looking at one another.

"Say something, Shay," Cosima said at last.

"I'm afraid to say the wrong thing," Shay admitted.

Cosima's lips thinned with irritation. "This is sort of why I'm not eager to tell people."

Shay brushed her hair behind an ear. "Do you want more congee?"

Cosima almost laughed. "No. Thank you."

"It wasn't that good, huh?" Shay said, an apology in her voice.

"It wasn't terrible," Cosima allowed. "More like . . . bland."

"It was the first time I tried this recipe," confessed Shay.

"It could use some tweaks."

"So you don't want me to leave any leftovers then?"

Cosima huffed a chuckle. "You know what? Leave it. It'll save me a lot of time and effort the next few meals."

Shay nodded. She collected her thoughts and said, "Cosima, I don't know what you're going through."

The jocularity fled Cosima's features.

Shay bit at her lower lip. "I know it wasn't your choice that I found out. You probably don't want to talk about it, but . . . have you considered counseling?"

No visible reaction manifested in Cosima's expression. At last Cosima said, "I admit I didn't expect that."

"I can look around, get reputable names, go with you, if you want," Shay said.

Cosima covered her face with a hand and shook her head, mouth stretched with incredulity.

"I'm serious," Shay insisted.

"I know. I know you are," Cosima said, placating.

"I don't know what your situation is like here in Toronto, but—"

"Shay," Cosima said from behind her hand, "I imagined a lot of ways this conversation could go, up to and including you pulling out a purported miracle root from your back pocket, but this wasn't any of the scenarios."

"I don't want you to think you have to go through this alone," Shay said quietly.

Cosima lowered her hand. "I'm not alone."
The declaration dropped Shay into a momentary pause of surprise that morphed into consternation at her surprise. Smothering the vexation, Shay exhaled into a cautious smile. "That's good."

"You're downstairs, too, right?" Cosima asked.

"Yeah," Shay confirmed softly. "But I can't substitute for a good counselor. I wasn't even sure how to approach you tonight. Clearly."

"Through a woman's stomach isn't a bad tactic," Cosima said.

"I think that only really works if you make something delicious," Shay hedged. "Maybe Delphine stepped out to get an actual dinner."

Cosima laughed. The peals sounded, Shay thought, genuinely delighted at the idea.

Calming down, eyes sparkling, Cosima sighed. "I really want you to ask her now."

Shay shook her head. "I couldn't do that."

"I know," Cosima lamented. "More's the pity."

But Cosima was smiling. The corners of her mouth unfettered from strain. The curve of her lips softened with understanding. Shay responded without thought. She smiled back.

* *

There was no errand to run. For at least thirty minutes Delphine sat in her car and checked emails, read papers, and granted Shay and Cosima privacy. Delphine could opt not to return, as per Cosima's request, but if nothing else drew her back inside there was still equipment to be brought up to Cosima's apartment.

The oxygen tank rode the wheelchair up to the second floor. Delphine's knock yielded the announcement the door was open.

Cosima and Shay remained in the same spots Delphine had left them. Cosima's expression darkened at the sight of the wheelchair preceding Delphine. Shay, recognizing the reality, projected sorrow.

"Just . . . dump that in a corner," Cosima said.

The wheelchair was folded into the furthest corner from Cosima and the oxygen was brought to roost beside the bed. As Delphine made her way over, Shay squeezed Cosima's knee, took possession of Cosima's bowl, and carried the dirty dishes to the sink.

"Use as much oxygen as you need," Delphine instructed Cosima. Pitching her voice lower, to be covered by the sound of running water, Delphine said, "I would feel better if I could remain with you tonight."

Cosima chuckled, but it lacked humor. "You mean here, in my apartment? I don't know if you noticed, Dr. Cormier, but I don't have a couch. Unless you're finally offering to warm my bed?"

"The chair would be enough for me."

Cosima's face hardened. "No."

"No?" Delphine echoed, taken aback.
"No more compromises," Cosima said. "I'm not going to sleep in my own bed knowing you're sitting in the corner like a creeper. You can't live that far away; I survived you trekking over here last time. Did any medical emergency occur while I was at the DYAD?"

"No," Delphine admitted reluctantly.

"Nothing's going to happen tonight," Cosima said.

The faucet stopped spewing water, landing Delphine and Cosima in a staredown stalemate.

"Hey, Cosima?" Shay called over. "Is it okay if I cover the stoneware with saran wrap and put it in the fridge?"

"That'd be great," Cosima said, turning to Shay. "The saran wrap should be on that shelf there."

When Shay stuck her head in the refrigerator, Delphine made another pitch, "Just one night."

"No," Cosima rebuffed her calmly. "But if I really need you in the middle of the night, I promise to wake you up."

Shay smiled in their direction when she closed the refrigerator door. "The tupperware with the fixings are on the top shelf. Do you need anything?"

Cosima shook her head. "I'm all set, thanks."

"Then I'll let you rest up," Shay said.

With grudging steps, Delphine backed away from the bed. "Do you need any help, Shay?"

"There's only the crockpot to bring back down," Shay said.

"I'll take it," Delphine said.

"Okay," Shay said with reluctance. Her gaze fell searchingly onto Delphine, as if to suss out the source of Delphine's curtness.

"Good night, Cosima," Delphine said, subdued.

Cosima met her gaze squarely. "Good night, Dr. Cormier." Her lips slipped into a small smile. "Feel free to drop in first thing in the morning if you're that concerned. You know—like last time."

Delphine twitched an eyebrow. "I might."

Delphine seized the crockpot and stepped out. Shay tracked her movements but didn't immediately follow. Delphine lingered in the hall and waited. In a minute Shay emerged, grabbed the door, and said over her shoulder, "Hey, you're going to have to lock the door."

Delphine heard Cosima's answering laugh. "I will."

"Night," Shay said.

"Night," called back Cosima.

Shay closed the door. When she and Delphine reached the stairs, Shay said, "Do you want to stay over tonight?"
Delphine looked over sharply. "Excuse me?"

Shay didn't quite meet Delphine's eyes. "Sound carries better in Cosima's apartment than you might have expected."

Delphine focused ahead, stone-faced.

"You can't sleep on the couch, though," Shay said.

Delphine looked over in question.

Shay smiled at her. "You wouldn't fit on it."

This was true. "Then where would I sleep?"

"On the bed," Shay answered blithely.

"Where would you sleep?" Delphine asked.

"On the other half of the bed," Shay said, as if it were obvious. She smiled at Delphine, then unlocked her door and hit the lightswitch, as if to reveal the piece of furniture in question. "It's not small."

Delphine laughed. "I couldn't."

"Why not?" Shay asked. "If you're worried that something might happen to Cosima overnight, my place is the closest you can be."

Delphine set the crockpot onto the dining table. With her back to Shay, she reviewed a list of excuses —she didn't have clothes, it was short notice and she couldn't put Shay at inconvenience, she didn't want to affect Shay's sleep—that her mind shot down as quickly as they were formulated. The fact that she had minutes ago requested the same of Cosima invalidated most of her threadbare claims.

"Cosima is probably right," Delphine said, turning around. "That nothing will happen tonight. I am likely worrying for no reason."

"For the record," Shay said, "it's not an inconvenience if you spend the night. And it'll probably be more comfortable than staying at Cosima's. I mean, the two of you would have had to share a bed."

Delphine laughed. "No, I—I told her I would sleep in the chair."

Shay grimaced. "The one you sat in? Do you know how stiff you would have been in the morning?"

"That didn't occur to me," Delphine admitted. She reconsidered. "You realize that if something happened and I were here, Cosima would call in the middle of the night."

"Then she'd have two people to help her," Shay pointed out.

Delphine contemplated the floor, then raised her head. "Maybe one night?"

Shay smiled. "I might have something that will fit you so that you don't have to sleep in your work clothes. I don't have any extra toothbrushes though."

Delphine checked the time. "Is there a convenience store nearby?"

"You want to pick up a toothbrush?" Shay asked. She hummed in thought. "There's a 7-Eleven."
"Do you need anything?" Delphine asked. Shay shook her head, wearing an amused smile. Delphine declared, "I'll be back."

Delphine found the 7-Eleven through the miracle of wireless navigational technology. At the checkout counter as her sole purchase was rung up and during the short drive back, Delphine assessed and reevaluated her decision. The toothbrush in her bag felt like a commitment, compounded by the sight of Shay already in sleepwear when she returned bearing the electronics she was loath to keep in the car overnight. Laid out on the bed was a folded towel and a similar outfit of flowy yoga pants and an oversized tee. Delphine touched the tee, her fingertips grazing the capital "R" of "ARMY" emblazoned across the chest.

"You don't have to wear it," Shay said.

"I'll try it on. Thank you."

Shay named and indicated all the amenities in the bathroom—toothpaste, cotton balls, makeup remover, facial cleanser, moisturizer, hair ties, comb and brush, all which Shay assured Delphine was welcome to use.

"Oh, and these," Shay said, sticking her head back into the bathroom and handing Delphine a handful of clothes hangers. "To hang up your work clothes."

Alone in the bathroom, Delphine took stock. Her reflection in the mirror appeared to gaze back at Delphine in accusation, as if to lay upon her the burden of her decision. Delphine took up Shay's items gingerly, as if they were precious artifacts or contraptions that might turn out to be traps, and made sparing use of them. But the warm water felt good on her face and Delphine spent a still, quiet minute bent over the sink doing nothing but breathe. The pants unfurled revealed themselves to be drawstring—short a few noticeable inches in length but made to fit snug upon Delphine's hips. The garment smelled of Shay—of the laundry detergent Shay used—wafting into Delphine's nose as she bent over to slip into each leg. The tee didn't emit the same degree of fragrance. It smelled more neutral, like Shay's home, as if it had been left to sit since its last launder. It didn't fit Delphine. It engulfed her. Delphine touched a sleeve, the shoulder seam dangling well past the natural conjunction of her humerus and acromion.

Delphine stepped out of the bathroom and was waylaid by Shay eager to take the clothes on the hangers. Delphine surrendered and said, "This shirt cannot be yours."

Shay threw a smile over her shoulder as she hung up Delphine's work clothes in the closet. "You don't think I was that big once upon a time?"

"Not unless in the time since then you shaved down your bones."

Shay laughed. "No bone shaving. The shirt was a, um, gift from a friend when I got out of the army. He wanted to give me a personal present to remember him by."

"His t-shirt?" Delphine asked.

"He considered it one of his few personal possessions," declared Shay. "I thought it was sweet."

Delphine made a noncommittal noise.

"He was kind of shy," Shay explained. "If you knew him, you'd know it was sweet of him."

"I'll have to thank him, then," Delphine said.
Shay smiled, part rueful, part wistful, and then asked, cautiously, "I should have asked earlier—did you have enough to eat? Are you hungry?"

"I'm fine," Delphine said.

"Sorry about dinner," Shay said. Delphine answered her with confusion. "I know it wasn't that great. It was the first time I tried that recipe."

Delphine smiled and repeated, "I'm fine."

"It's kind of early still," Shay said. "I don't know if there's work you need to do or . . ."

"Is there anything you need to do?" asked Delphine, as the intruder.

"No," Shay said. Hesitantly, she added, "Sometimes I meditate before bed. I'm not really a night owl like you or Cosima."

"I think Cosima is far more deserving of that title," Delphine said with a smile. "Don't let me get in your way—this is your home. If you don't mind, there are a few things I could look over."

Shay set up on a mat in the living area and Delphine unpacked her laptop on the dining table. Time passed quietly. Occasionally Delphine found herself simply watching Shay, not intently or in study, but wherein her gaze rested on Shay as an available fixture upon which to settle her sight. In that quietude they carried into an hour. Delphine was surprised to note the time when Shay opened her eyes and reached up in a slow stretch. Shay proceeded to transition through a series of poses, holding each for considerable still life counts, before she finished and glanced in Delphine's direction. When she noticed Delphine watching her, Shay returned the observation with a smile.

"All done?" Delphine asked.

"Yeah," Shay said, still seated. "But I might turn in soon. You don't have to if you still have work to do or if you're not tired. I can sleep through a lot of conditions."

"I'm tired," Delphine said and let herself sound so.

Shay rolled and stowed the mat while Delphine packed up her laptop and cords. Shay turned down the blankets, and then said, "I hope you don't mind sleeping on the inside."

"On the inside?" Delphine wondered.

"That side," Shay said, pointing at the end of the bed closest to the far wall.

"Any side is fine," Delphine said. She paused. "You didn't share the bed the last time I spent the night."

Shay shrugged. "At the time I thought that it might be alarming if you woke up disoriented and with me in the same bed. You weren't really in a state to argue with me. Unlike now. If I said I would sleep on the couch, what would you say?"

"That's ridiculous," Delphine said.

Shay raised a hand palm up. "See?"

Delphine crossed around to the other side of the bed, contemplated the stool in the corner, and asked, "Is it okay if I put my phone here?"
"Go for it," Shay encouraged her and waited until Delphine fiddled with the sound settings, set down her phone, and settled under the sheets to turn off the lights. The mattress shifted beneath Delphine as Shay slipped in beside her. Brightness pierced the dimness as Shay performed her own phone check, set it aside on the stand on her side, and huddled beneath the blankets. Delphine tracked the small adjustments Shay made through the jostling the mattress communicated along the length of her body. Shay stilled and the twilight languished atop them gently. Into the hush, Shay said, "Good night, Delphine."

"Good night, Shay."

"Sleep well. Don't let the bedbugs bite."

Delphine processed the well-meaning, but alarming sentiment and then asked, because she couldn't help herself, "Are there bedbugs?"

"No," Shay said quickly. As an afterthought, she added, "I hope not."

"Even if there were," Delphine said, "why would I 'let' them bite? I would have no power over whether or not they bite me. They would do so with or without my permission."

"Are you trying to make me explain an English idiom?" Shay asked.

"Perhaps."

"I mean, it at least makes sense on its face," groused Shay, "but I'm not going to pretend to understand the whims of bedbugs and our powerlessness over them. Though now it's going to bother me, thanks."

"You're welcome," Delphine said warmly. Delphine lay for a beat staring up into the darkness. She announced, "Your mattress is so firm."

"It's better for you," Shay murmured, sleepiness threading through her voice.

"I know," Delphine concurred. Delphine had made a note of the firmness of Shay's mattress after her last stay, mostly through the fact that she'd had far less stiffness in her hip and shoulder than she'd expected. In the weeks and months after the accident and the surgeries, lingering soreness had plagued Delphine's waking hours. That she was prolonging her own suffering didn't click until her physical therapist asked about her mattress. She'd replaced it. "The mattress I have now is very, very firm."

"That makes sense," Shay said. "I guess it's just preference for me. I thought I would like soft beds after years of lumpy ones or overall weird conditions, but it turns out I don't."

"Yes, I noticed the yoga mat doesn't look particularly cushioned," Delphine said.

Shay chuckled, a low, drowsy effort. "It's actually pretty comfy."

"Comfortable as in you've fallen asleep on it?"

That giggle again, self-deprecating. "Yes."

"That is a predilection for the very firm," Delphine said in admiration. She studied the light caught in the window panes. "By weird conditions, you meant the habitation situations in the military?"

Delphine glanced in Shay's direction, but all she could discern was the lump of golden hair that peeked out of the mound of blankets.
"Yeah," Shay conceded softly. She exhaled in a sound akin to a laugh. "I feel like I've been talking a lot about that time lately."

Delphine weighed Shay's idle observation. "Is that unusual?"

"I guess I don't bring it up much with people who were outside of the experience."

Delphine digested that kernel. At last she said, "I'm grateful your mattress is very firm."

"You're welcome," Shay said wryly.

Delphine tried closing her eyes. A minute did not pass without thoughts nattering at her. Delphine opened her eyes and squinted into the dimness. "Shay?"

"Hm?" came the fading hum.

"Did you and Cosima talk?"

A pause preceded a reply.

"Yeah," Shay exhaled. "She was pretty understanding about dinner."

Delphine chuckled. "It was fine. It was edible."

"Thanks," Shay said, the note of wryness tinged with good-natured tolerance. Her voice softened. "When I suggested counseling, she pretty much laughed." Surprise rendered Delphine momentarily mute and into that silence Shay added, "You warned me."

Delphine didn't know what to make of Cosima's response. She'd imagined Cosima would understand as she did that counseling was not an option but not that Cosima would be dismissive to a degree to leave Shay with such an impression. Delphine tried to tease out if Shay had been offended.

The possibility bothered Delphine.

Pushing aside the disquiet, Delphine ventured, "Do you feel better?"

"Having talked to her?" Shay said. "Yeah. I do. I feel . . . relieved? That we can still talk."

"That's good."

"Yeah," Shay breathed.

Shay could not have been terribly bothered if that were the case.

Delphine smiled. "Good night, Shay."

"Good night," Shay murmured.

Delphine closed her eyes, exhaled, and invited the soft sounds and the undercurrent of Shay's breathing to lull her to sleep.

Chapter End Notes
This is my lesson to not to try to edit a chapter on a Friday and to get the editing done beforehand.

I want to say thank you to everyone who left me comments or dropped in to talk to me in the past weeks wherein I didn't update—I appreciate it, I enjoy it immensely, I am humbled by the fact that you continue to read this story and that you want to read more. I will try to get to comments but I was a little embarrassed to reply to comments when I didn't have a new chapter for you to read and felt that I should instead focus on writing new material. Please know that when you talk to me about the story, it helps drag the story into the forefront of my mind so that I'm thinking about it and, hopefully, generating ideas. Thank you!

That said, we might be going on these occasional hiatuses every once in a while if I catch up to myself again, so thank you for your patience with me.

:)

Can we add to our agreement that when this story becomes dull and boring, you let me know? I'll know when I have to quit while I'm ahead. XD
Part V: without knowing how, or when, or from where

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Murky twilight infiltrated Delphine's sluggish senses. Out of habit she turned to check the nightstand clock. But no glowing LED numbers greeted her search. Though the rational, waking part of her mind knew that the exercise was irrational and pointless, Delphine rolled to look across the other side of the bed for the missing clock as if the time-measuring device had migrated on the current of the flow of minutes. She squinted into the empty corner until the room's decor penetrated her recognition: Shay's.

Delphine dropped her head back upon the pillow and resettled, closing her eyes, trying to entice the return of sleep. But unconsciousness danced out of reach. The small sounds of the apartment mingled with the reminders of an outside world. The cheerful chirp of a car security system being deactivated. A door slamming shut. A vehicle coasting down the street emitting its approach and departure in doppler.

Delphine's thoughts floated from aural clue to aural clue. They felt close. Closer than these incidents visited her in her own apartment farther removed from the ground level. Yet not as close as the sudden jingle of an alarm.

Delphine opened her eyes to see Shay grope for the blaring phone. The raucous ceased abruptly.

Shay rolled over and spied Delphine watching. "Sorry." Shay put her phone down on the bed and trapped it beneath her hand. "I forgot to warn you that my alarm goes off kind of early."

Delphine rubbed at her eyes. "No worry. I was already awake."

Distress brought alertness to Shay's features. "You didn't sleep well?"

"No, no, I slept fine," Delphine assured her. "Better than I expected actually." She reached over and checked her own phone for any missed calls and messages. Nothing. She noted the time, 05:50, replaced the phone on the stool, and rolled back around.

"All good?" Shay asked.

"Nothing good, nothing bad. Nothing at all," Delphine said with a little shrug.

"No news is good news, then," Shay said.

"We'll have to take it that way. Do you usually wake up at this time?"

"Around this time," Shay confirmed. "I usually try to get in some type of activity in the morning—yoga, or a jog, or some meditation."

"Very healthy," Delphine observed.

Shay hesitated. "Yeah. It's . . . also about keeping a routine. Regular activity, regular schedule."

Delphine reviewed her memories. "I don't remember if you did that the last time I was here."

Shay smiled. "You slept through it."
"Your alarm?"

"No, the meditation. I take cheat days, too. Some days you don't want to do anything."

Shay didn't move.

"Is today one of those days?" Delphine asked. "You're not getting up?"

"I hit snooze. The alarm will go off again in ten minutes," Shay said. "I'll get up, then."

"Okay," Delphine murmured and closed her eyes. She opened them again a minute later, convinced she was no longer drowsy, and found Shay had closed her eyes. Delphine studied Shay in the haze of light that issued through the window at Delphine's back. Delphine had never, she realized, seen Shay sleep. She'd never heard Shay even mention naps. Delphine doubted Shay was sleeping now. Then again maybe Shay was. There were people like that, who could fall asleep without struggle, without effort, without defense. Maybe Shay was like that. How could Delphine know? It wasn't something she'd thought to ask. It wasn't a question Delphine had had reason or opportunity to ask.

Were such innocuous questions the one Shay held back from voicing?

Or did Shay's questions run deeper?

Delphine had been thinking about how Shay held back her thoughts. That the same experience didn't hold for Delphine. Delphine withheld information that could not be shared but hesitation seldom stalled her in broaching a concern and rarely did she curb an impulse to scratch at a curiosity. Shay made it easy—it had almost always been unthinkingly, effortlessly easy with Shay.

Delphine hadn't realized it had become that way, it had happened so naturally. She'd assumed the same easygoingness in Shay's reception applied to Shay's attitude toward approach. Perhaps she'd misclassified silence as indication of a lack of questions.

But Delphine knew better than to issue an open invitation.

She had no idea what questions would burst forth.

What suspicions and uncertainties lurked behind that face?

What were the questions Delphine was afraid to answer?

Why would Delphine be afraid, when everything that must be kept hidden was protected by binding contract?

(Yet she was.)

Shay's phone lit up, vibrating and singing. Shay's eyes cracked open and she deactivated the alarm without bothering to pick up the device. Upon discovering Delphine peering at her, Shay smiled.

Delphine's heart lurched.

"You're good to me," Delphine said.

Shay's smile faltered for confusion. "You mean for letting you stay over? You'd do the same for me."

"Yes, I would," Delphine said. Her tone, sincere and low, chipped further at Shay's smile. "For you."
Shay's lips appeared to bow toward the brink of a frown. Without thought, Delphine reached up and probed at a corner of Shay's mouth, as if she could smooth away the tension—the tension Delphine had put there. Shay's breath stilled. Delphine's thumb grazed Shay's chin. Delphine raised her eyes from Shay's lips to those blue eyes. The eye contact jolted Shay into motion. Shay rolled away, out from beneath the sheets and Delphine's hand, and onto her feet.

"Thank goodness it's Friday, huh?" Shay breathed out hard, almost loudly. "I'm—I'm going to go for a run." Shay rummaged in her closet for clothes, intent on her task. "If you want to use the shower, you're welcome to. If you're hungry, there's granola and yogurt in the fridge, or there's bread on top of the fridge. The butter and jam are on the inside of the door—the refrigerator door."

Delphine lay quiet, her pulse jumping, her nerves in a jumble, unsure what just occurred.

"I don't have coffee, sorry," Shay continued, the speed of her delivery bordering on babbling, "but there's tea." She carried an armful of clothes into the bathroom and there was abrupt silence.

Delphine rubbed her fingertips together. The ones that had rested upon Shay's cheek.


Shay bustled out of the bathroom pulling her hair up into a ponytail. At the door she pulled on sneakers, tied them, straightened up, and said, "I'll be back."

Shay opened the door and slipped out. The door closed. Keys rattled as the lock turned.

Delphine still lay in bed.

But she felt displaced.

Shifted.

After a minute, Delphine moved. She used the bathroom, splashed water on her face, exchanged her borrowed garments for her own, folded Shay's shirt and pants and placed them on the edge of the bed, picked up her bags, and, though she couldn't lock the door, left before Shay returned.

Cosima was ready for Delphine's morning call. Granted, Delphine placed her call reasonably late in the morning given her return to her own apartment, the long shower she permitted herself, the mindless minute she stood before her open closet without considering the neatly hung garments, the breakfast of black coffee and croissant that passed unremarked by her tastebuds, and the gridlock beginning to loosen its congestion of the streets.

Cosima smirked at Delphine when she opened the door. "Caught up on some sleep?"

"How was your sleep?" Delphine countered.

"Like a baby in a womb of privacy," Cosima declared.

Delphine tried to hide her smile of amusement and failed. "May I help you bring your things down?"

"Packhorse," Cosima said, "yet another monitor duty."

Cosima moved with notable improvement in ease and mobility. Her respiration appeared short, but not taxed, her complexion remained pale, but bore no hints of clamminess or fever, her gaze was clear, and they conducted the journey to Delphine's car at a standard clip. Cosima slipped into the
passenger seat with unassisted ease while Delphine placed her laptop bag in the trunk.

They set off without chatter. The silence in the car nursed Delphine's thoughts. Cosima seemed as unperturbed and content in her own bubble of reserve.

They weren't friends, she and Cosima.

At a stoplight, Delphine tapped the steering wheel. "Cosima?"

Cosima looked over in interest.

Words popped out of Delphine's mouth: "How do you know you're attracted to someone?"

Delphine regretted asking Cosima the moment she heard the words rattling the tympanic membranes in her ears. But the person Delphine wanted to ask was not an option.

Delphine could feel Cosima's stare, could make out the intensity of Cosima's attention in the periphery of her vision. At last Cosima said, "You can't just . . . start the day like that. I have so many questions I don't know which one to ask."

Delphine swallowed. "You know that your sexuality is a point of interest when taken into account with the orientation of all of the others."

"So are you specifically asking me how I know I'm attracted to women?" Cosima asked.

Delphine saw an opportunity for cover. "I told you that I had never considered an interest in women for myself. I'm trying to understand you and your experience."

"You're trying to understand me," Cosima said slowly, "by understanding my attraction to women?" Cosima took stock of Delphine from an angle. "There are lots of other avenues you could explore to get to know me."

Delphine kept her silence.

"Let me guess," Cosima continued, "you talked to Shay."

Delphine sucked at her lips.

Cosima glanced out the window.

"Look," Cosima said, "you have a type of guy you like, right? Maybe he's tall, maybe he's funny, maybe he likes science or dogs, maybe he has a beard, maybe he's got cheekbones or broad shoulders—you know what I mean? Being attracted to someone of the same sex is not all that different. Attraction is . . . attraction. If there's a difference, I'd say it has more to do with a—" Cosima circled her hands in the air. "—potential factor of uncertainty. When you're a woman who is opposite-sex-attracted, you get to live in a world where you can more or less safely assume a man you see is likewise heterosexual. It's okay to hit on him or signal your interest. When you're homosexual, sometimes you have to . . . put in more investigative work. But you know when you're drawn to someone. Right?" Cosima shrugged. "I think by most metrics Shay is an attractive woman."

Delphine nodded. It took a moment for her mind to assess Cosima's observation. Delphine diverted her gaze from traffic. "Wait, what?"

"What?" Cosima asked.
"You're attracted to Shay?"

Cosima scanned Delphine's face. Delphine swept her gaze back onto the road ahead but quickly turned back to Cosima, alternating glances in both directions. Cosima squinted at Delphine. Then Cosima erupted into laughter.

When she calmed down, Cosima turned away and nodded. "Good luck with your experiment, Dr. Cormier."

"What experiment?" Delphine asked.

Cosima didn't answer.

*

Scott welcomed Cosima back with enthusiasm. Delphine couldn't determine if he wanted to hug Cosima, but if he did, he refrained and opted for a wide smile of relief.

"Just a bad case of the flu," Cosima informed him. "I'm ready to put my nose back to the grindstone."

Scott glanced at Delphine, as if expecting her to make an exit the same way she had every previous day of the week. Delphine displayed a placid smile and lowered herself before a computer terminal.

Aldous summoned Delphine within the hour.

"Cosima is back?" Aldous asked without preamble within a step of Delphine's entrance. His gaze on Delphine bore an intensity that put up Delphine's guard.

"To a degree of functionality, yes," Delphine said. "Technically Cosima has been here this whole week. She was infected with the flu, if you can believe it."

"Yes, that's good to hear," Aldous said gruffly, which led Delphine to doubt he'd processed a word she'd said. His eyes bounced agitatedly around the room. "Has she said anything to you?"

"About what?" Delphine asked with care.

"Anything of note," Aldous said, on the verge of snapping.

Uncertain what the source of his agitation could be, Delphine couched her reply in caution. "Not that I can think of. She's been ill and isolated for almost the entirety of the week. She seemed eager to return to work this morning, but not eager to talk."

Aldous's jaw shifted stiffly. "Report to me immediately if you hear anything significant."

"What, exactly, am I looking for, Aldous?" Delphine asked.

Aldous eyed her in irritation. "Just keep your ears open, Delphine."

Delphine didn't push. When she returned to the lab, Cosima eyed her with intrigue and suspicion.

Thank goodness it was Friday.
Cosima and Scott fluttered around the laboratory like background activity in a play. They huddled in conference over printouts and screens in speculative chatter. Delphine hovered over them at times, but a sense of disconnection clouded her concentration.

Her mind tracked and noted idle observations on Cosima's appearance and movements throughout the day.

Her thoughts worried on the possibility that something unknown to her but salient to Aldous preoccupied the director.

But again and again throughout the course of the day, Delphine found herself rubbing her fingertips together.

Delphine couldn't stop thinking about that morning.

* 
Shay's skin had been soft to Delphine's touch.

* 
Shay's lips had, for a second, parted.

* 
There had been—something—in Shay's eyes.

* 
And then Delphine had—

* 
At the conclusion of set work hours, Cosima nudged Delphine's elbow. "Hey, you want to drive me home?"

Somehow Cosima managed to make it sound like a proper invitation.

During the car ride, Cosima asked without looking over at Delphine, "You've had boyfriends, right? Like actual boyfriends who weren't your boss."

Delphine didn't overcome a frown, but she herself had invited the line of inquiry. "Yes."

"You knew you were attracted to them in those cases, right?"

Delphine slowed to allow a car to move into her lane. Her answer came slower. "Yes."

Cosima turned to regard Delphine. "I mean bona fide relationships, not hookups or one night stands."

Delphine focused on the traffic. "Yes."

"Though I guess the hookups count if we're just talking about attraction," Cosima amended.

"Do you find men attractive?" Delphine asked.

"Sure," Cosima said.
Delphine looked over sharply. "Yes?"

"I have eyes," drawled Cosima, shooting Delphine a look of amusement, "and opinions about pleasing and displeasing. But I don't have much interest in having sex with men."

"How do you know?" Delphine asked, then swallowed a groan. What a novice question.

Cosima grinned. She turned her attention back out the window. "My fantasies don't tend to involve men or fixate on them. And where my mind stops, my body lets me know. You have to trust what you feel."

Delphine's lips thinned in thought.

"You know what contributed to my suspicion about Shay maybe being my real monitor?" Cosima asked with a rhetorical flourish. "She's nice, she's cute—why is she single? You ever wonder that?"

Delphine ran her tongue between her lips. "Yes."

"It seems like someone like her should be able to find someone, right?"

"I have thought so," Delphine agreed.

"Maybe you should help her," mused Cosima.

"Help her to find someone? I don't know many gay women—beyond Shay and you."

Cosima smiled. "Yeah, and you wouldn't want her to date me."

Delphine's gut clenched. "If it made her happy . . ."

Cosima smirked at Delphine in open derision. "Really, Dr. Cormier?"

"I have no place meddling in Shay's personal business," Delphine said.

"That's true. As her friend, you can give her advice but you can't make her decisions for her," Cosima conceded. "But would you really be happy for her?"

Delphine focused intently ahead. "I would worry about her safety."

Cosima nodded. "I get that. I guess you get that, too."

Delphine's brow pinched in confusion. "Yes, as I just said."

Cosima turned away. "You honestly never asked yourself why Leekie chose you to be my monitor?"

Delphine took a deep breath to settle her nerves. Cosima's conversation seemed straightforward, but her tone held something Delphine couldn't identify. "The reason seems obvious. He had me under his thumb. He could trust me. He'd already assigned me to Jennifer before you, so I was familiar with the circumstances."

"But you weren't assigned to Jennifer as her monitor," Cosima pointed out. Cosima shook her head. "Open your eyes, Dr. Cormier. Maybe Leekie wasn't far off the mark as to your qualifications to be my monitor."

Delphine's thoughts seesawed like physical weights in her head. "Say what you want to say, Cosima."
"You need to consult a mirror, not me," Cosima said.

Regarding what? Delphine wanted to demand, but her tongue cleaved to the back of her teeth.

*I don't need your help getting upstairs," Cosima said as she stepped out of the car and hefted all of her bags. "Say hi to Shay for me. Let her know I'm going to work on that rice porridge."

"She would probably appreciate it more if she heard it from you," Delphine countered, pushing aside the affront that reared at Cosima's assumption—though it was a logical leap that Delphine would say hello to Shay while she was here.

"Would she?" Cosima wondered mildly. "You don't think that relaying my message would make her think that you and I are getting along?"

"She would want to know you're doing well."

"Point. But she can ask you."

"She won't ask. She doesn't feel it's her place."

"Yeah, she has that problem, doesn't she?" mused Cosima. "Feel free to tell her I'm still alive. Night, Dr. Cormier. Thanks for the ride."

Cosima toddled inside. Delphine remained seated for a minute after Cosima's departure, then took up her phone.

To Shay [19:03]: Hello. Are you home? May I come in?

Delphine stewed in anticipation of a reply. Or maybe the turning of her stomach was dread.


Shay did not make direct eye contact when she opened the door. There was a smile on her lips, but one that strained at the corners. "Hey."

"Hey," Delphine said as she shuffled inside.

"Did you drive Cosima home?" Shay asked.

"Yes," Delphine said. "She's doing much better today. I was a bit surprised at the degree of her improvement, to be honest."

"That's good," Shay said, circling into the kitchen, not so much speaking to Delphine as projecting her words into the atmosphere. "Maybe returning home helped. Are you thirsty? Would you like anything to drink?"

"No, thank you, I'm fine," Delphine said. In the wake of Delphine's refusal, Shay putzed around the kitchen, as if unsure what to do next. Delphine stood by the end of the kitchen table, watching Shay linger in an air of aimlessness.

"I wanted to thank you for letting me stay last night," Delphine said.

Shay pivoted to put the counter at her back and leaned against it, reaching behind her to grasp the ledge on either side. "Yeah, of course. You don't need to thank me for that."
"But I think I should apologize for this morning," Delphine said softly. "Rather . . . I think an apology might be appropriate."

"You mean for leaving before I got back?" Shay asked, confused. She crossed her arms. "I was a little surprised but—I figured you probably had things to do, since it was Cosima's first day back to work and everything."

Delphine shook her head. She wrung her hands and studied them. "I'm sorry I left like that, that was rude of me." She raised her eyes, nibbling at her lower lip. "I left because . . . I wasn't sure you wanted to see me when you returned."

Shay's forehead dimpled. "Why would you think that?"

The volume of Delphine's voice plummeted with the weight of the truth in the words that emerged. "Because I think I wanted to kiss you this morning."

They stared at one another, standing apart at a calculated distance.

"I think you knew it," Delphine continued, trying to speak louder and failing, "before I did."

The intense blue of Shay's eyes—so often unnoted or overlooked—blazed across the gap between them.

"I've been thinking about it all day," Delphine breathed.

Shay turned away, jaw working, brow furrowed with a depth of indiscernible emotion.

Delphine leaned over to try to catch better sight of Shay's face. "Shay?"

Shay exhaled heavily through her nose.

"Say something please," Delphine entreated.

Shay stared off into the distance. Delphine took a cautious step forward. The click of her heel turned Shay's head. Delphine stopped in her tracks.

Shay's eyes were bright, sharp, but there was a lost quality to her gaze. Shay shook her head.

"Delphine," Shay said and the crack in her voice rent through Delphine's chest like a wound. Shay closed her eyes briefly, arms tightening around her middle. When she opened her eyes again, Delphine realized Shay was blinking away tears.

"I'm sorry," Delphine breathed, sadness welling in her heart. "Perhaps I shouldn't have said anything. But you—"

Shay watched her, daring Delphine to complete the thought.

"If this occurred with any other woman, any other person," Delphine rushed to explain, "I'd want to discuss it with you. What I feel. What I think. What it means. What I should do. But how am I supposed to discuss you . . . with you?"

Shay studied Delphine with impenetrable opacity—a blank, neutral expression coupled with a gaze that seemed intent to bore through Delphine. After what felt like an interminable standoff, Shay bowed her head.

"I didn't know," Shay said. She lifted her head, worrying at her lower lip and not looking at
Delphine. "This morning. I didn't—it wasn't you. It wasn't—" Shay stared off hard into the corner, then closed her eyes, her frustration lying on the tension of her muscles. "Are you sure?"

"Pardon?" Delphine managed.

Shay turned burning eyes on Delphine. "Are you sure? Are you sure that's what you felt? Are you sure—because this is—it's so hard to . . ." Shay caught her breath. "You're going through a lot right now. You're under a lot of stress and pressure and I know there are—so many things that are uncertain. Work and Cosima and—and—" Shay shook her head. "I'm here for you. You don't have to—"

Shay unraveled.

That was the only way Delphine could describe what she saw.

It was as if every word, every new train of thought were a pinch of wrapping paper and every iteration pulled away at the layers in uneven strips, revealing a woman Delphine had never before seen: terrified.

"Shay," Delphine said.

Shay stopped speaking and focused on Delphine.

Holding Shay's gaze, Delphine crossed the room with the same awareness that had seized her that morning, her body leading, her mind focused but not with intent, simply in motion, in action. Shay watched her approach. Delphine moved slowly. Deliberate. Forecasting. Her hands settled on Shay's shoulders. Shay stared up at her. Delphine's arms slipped around Shay's stiff and wound form. Shay's head bowed. Delphine pressed her nose to the crown of Shay's hair. Shay stood tense in her grasp. Delphine rubbed Shay's back.

"It was me," Shay said quietly. "I had to leave because—because what I felt. In that moment. But I never—"

Delphine pulled back. Shay raised her head.

"I know," Delphine said. "Thank you."

Delphine leaned down and kissed Shay Davydov.

Chapter End Notes

The end.

No, it's not, but I kind of wish it were. This moment has been a long time coming--is, in fact, the beginning of the answer to the original question that spawned this story: Could Shay and Delphine have been a thing in a different universe?

At one point I wasn't sure I was still around or toward that question and at other points I really thought I would hit on the answer much sooner than this. And yet the one question I've constantly asked my beta reader--and fanficcer!--jaybear1701 has been, "Is this rushed?" I have been working against a fear of making a final decision in this matter because I wasn't sure I could deliver once I did make a choice. Sometimes you don't
want the "canon" to make a choice because whatever is in your own imagination is so much better and the narrative becomes disappointing.

(I think your imagination in this regard was probably so much better than mine.)
Shay wished she could have said that the floor of her mind disintegrated and pitched rational thought plummeting, that she heard arias sung by the stars, that she forgot herself and where she was and what she was doing, that the softness of Delphine's lips obliterated cautious inhibition, that the weight of Delphine's hand coming to rest on her hip anchored her body to a single-minded intent, raising heat beneath her skin and an ache she felt in the core of her heart, especially when Delphine deepened the kiss from tentative to exploratory, raising the small hairs on the back of Shay's neck.

But.

Shay placed a hand upon Delphine's sternum and gently pushed.

Delphine ceded and pulled back, eyes closed, lips parted. She dragged at her lower lip with her teeth, then breathed, as if in answer to a question, "Yes."

Delphine opened her eyes and gazed down at Shay. A smile spread across Delphine's lips slowly, but it stretched and grew in a sentiment that seemed to sweep across all the planes of Delphine's features. The sight fanned a feeble flame of hope within Shay, but she banked it with vicious circumspection.

Assessing Shay's expression, Delphine's manic reaction faltered.

"Can we take a step back?" Shay requested in a soft voice. Her throat was dry. She cleared it, swallowed. "For a moment?"

Delphine's grip loosened, opening up a space between their bodies. "Was that—not okay? Was that too forward?" She paused. "Is it Cosima?"

"What? No. What?" stuttered Shay, completely derailed. "Why would you ask that?"

"I don't know," Delphine said, speaking quickly. "I can't tell if you're upset or not and I'm trying to find reasons why you might be."

"But I just told you how this morning—" Shay shook her head. "This has nothing to do with Cosima."

"My thoughts may not be very in order at the moment," confessed Delphine. "You still haven't answered my question."

Shay studied Delphine. "This is all—very sudden. And new to you. Everything probably feels bright and . . . shiny and . . . exciting right now." Shay swallowed. "But I don't know—I don't know if you and I are compatible—in this capacity."

"Compatible?" Delphine echoed, incredulous, fingers spasming in a clutch on Shay's hip and shoulder. "You are one of the most important people in my life. There is no one I would rather talk to or spend an evening with or take to the museum. What would change, except for—" Delphine reached up and brushed the back of her fingers across Shay's cheek. "—this?"

"A lot," Shay said, quashing the temptation to lean into Delphine's touch. "The physical stuff is part
of it, yeah, but—it's small things, it's big things. It's the fact that I'm a pescetarian and you're not. It's that there are different expectations when—when you're with someone. If you think I'm nosy now . . ."

Shay shook her head. "I don't know—I don't know how this looks long-term. I don't know if there is a long-term."

Delphine squinted into Shay's gaze. "Is that how you felt about our friendship? That it wouldn't last? You're already at the conclusion when we have barely presented a hypothesis, much less performed any trials."

"I've thought about this longer than you have," Shay said. The admission passed her lips without thought, but it left Shay hollowed with the realization she'd voiced it. Trepidation crowded the vacuum. Shay took a deep breath. "This isn't like an experiment. You can't . . . reset whenever you want to and start over. What's between us now—you lose that."

"You've told me that you are friends with some of your exes."

"Getting there again takes time. And it usually turns out . . . different from how it was," Shay said.

Delphine's chin bobbed in a distracted nod. "Are you saying that we shouldn't try at all? You still haven't said if it was okay that I kissed you."

Shay took in a sharp half-breath. "I haven't jumped out of your arms, have I?"

"No," Delphine concurred, lips twitching at the corners. "But maybe so much is happening that it didn't occur to you that I'm still holding you."

"I know you're still holding me," Shay acknowledged softly.

"That's okay?" Delphine pressed.

"I'm not sure yet," Shay said.

"Okay," Delphine said, a smile blossoming like a bud touched by sunlight, "then we can stand here until you determine if it's okay or not. What else do I need to do to help you decide?"

Help Shay decide. Someone had made up her mind. Shay bowed her head to obstruct an exasperated smile.

"Shay," Delphine said her name softly and the tenderness of the utterance threatened assault on Shay's heart. Shay raised her head. "Maybe I haven't been thinking about it for very long, but I want to try this. With you. What do you want?"

"Let's . . . go slowly," Shay cautioned, "and see."

A grin claimed Delphine's mouth. "Okay. Have you had dinner? Are you hungry? Would you like to go out?"

"Oh my God," breathed Shay. "Are you proposing that we go on a date, like, right now?"

"Yes," Delphine said. "Isn't that what dating is?"

Her hand still on Delphine's chest, Shay swept her palm across to grasp Delphine's shoulder, fingertips brushing along the line of Delphine's collarbone. She noted the way Delphine's breath caught. "Maybe we should go even slower than that."

"Okay," Delphine conceded. "I could sit with you here and hold your hand."
"Delphine," Shay huffed.

"I'm serious," Delphine said, the brightness of her voice undermining her profession of gravity. "If I'm not with you, what do you think I will be thinking about all night?"

Shay sucked in her bottom lip. Delphine watched her with patient interest.

Shay hadn't gambled on Delphine being a flatterer. Too often underestimating Delphine came at a price of Shay's own peril.

"Maybe we both need a night—at least—to think about this," Shay asserted.

"Okay," Delphine relented in a tone of resignation. She recovered a soft smile. "May I see you tomorrow? We could have dinner. At my place."

"What?" Shay asked, smothering a laugh.


Shay gently backed out of the circle of Delphine's grasp, which released Shay willingly but with reluctance, and captured Delphine's hands in her own. Shay squeezed. "Let's see how we feel tomorrow."

Delphine studied Shay, eyes keen, penetrating, but dancing as well. "Okay. You're right."

Shay tugged gently and led Delphine to the door. Shay released a hand to open it. Delphine hesitated, then bent and kissed Shay on both cheeks. "Good night, Shay."

"Good night, Delphine," Shay said and, in a near pantomime of chivalrous, handed Delphine out the door. They stood on either side of the threshold, eye contact lingering. Shay ducked her head and, with some timidity, closed the door behind Delphine.

* 

With a barrier firmly between her and Delphine, Shay ran her hands through her hair and reminded herself to breathe.

What the hell?

She might have spoken aloud.

Or maybe she only exclaimed in her thoughts.

Maybe it was all in Shay's head.

What the hell.

When she finally crawled into bed, Shay spent a long time alternating between attempts to close her eyes and staring at the ceiling, trying not to think about how the night before Delphine had lain beside her and everything about that situation had been different and now everything between them was changed.

* 

Shay woke in the middle of the night with the distinct impression that she'd said too much, that in the overwhelming confusion in the wake of Delphine's unexpected behavior she had babbled crumbs of
the bald truth and exposed all that had lain raw and unresolved in the basement of her thoughts, that in the light of day the intellect of Delphine Cormier would divine the wheat from the chaff and reveal that—

That Shay had what?
Shay didn't know.
She'd never arrived at knowing. She hadn't dared let herself set down the path.

#

The call came early in the morning.
"Good morning," Delphine hailed Shay warmly.
"Are you actually calling me at seven in the morning?" Shay asked.
There was an interjection of dead air. "Did I wake you?"

"How are you awake?" countered Shay.

"I thought I would survey your thoughts about dinner tonight," Delphine replied, which was notably not an answer.

"At seven in the morning," deadpanned Shay.

"Yes."
Shay wished she weren't smiling.

"I hoped to get a head start on planning," Delphine said. "If you are amenable to join me for dinner, that is."

"Amenable," Shay parroted in an incredulous whisper. She covered her eyes. "What time would you want me to come over?"

"Six? Is that too early?"

"That sounds . . . reasonable," Shay said, faltering, somewhat disbelieving what she was saying. "What should I bring?"

"Nothing but yourself," Delphine said. "I will text you my address. There is a parking garage beneath the building. The entrance is on the, mmm, west side. The first level has guest spaces—near the entrance. They're marked. I think you should be able to find a space to park. I haven't had many guests over to know if they're usually taken or not. Give my name to the concierge. I'll let them know you're coming."

"Concierge," Shay said to herself, mindful that Delphine lent the pronunciation its French accents. Shay didn't often contemplate the differences between Delphine's situation and her own, the gulfs between their experiences, chosen and not, but some aspects were coming into stark relief.

"Is that okay?" Delphine asked when Shay didn't reply. "Six o'clock? I'll see you tonight?"

"Six o'clock," Shay confirmed. "I'll see you then."
"Tonight," Delphine said in a way that projected both the heft of a promise and the image of a smile into Shay's mind. "Ciao."

"Bye," Shay managed. She lowered the phone and looked aimlessly about her apartment.

There were eleven hours to kill.

*Laden with grocery bags, Delphine detoured to the front desk. Seated and aware of her deviation, Francis looked at her expectantly.

"Hello, Francis."

"Good morning, Dr. Cormier."

Delphine nodded absently. "I have a guest coming over tonight," Delphine told him. "Can you make a note? Her name is Shay Davydov. She should be arriving around six." She reconsidered.

"Probably after six. Do you think she'll be able to find parking in the garage?"

Francis nodded, eyes pinched in assessment. "I think it'll be okay, Dr. Cormier."

"But if not?" Delphine asked.

"She might have to go two, three blocks over if she can't find spaces immediately out front, but she should have luck."

Delphine nodded. "Okay. Good."

"Jerry will be on desk tonight," Francis said. "He'll call up when she arrives."

"Thank you, Francis," Delphine said. Hands full, she settled on an amiable nod in departure. "Have a good day."

"You, too, Dr. Cormier."

"Yes, I think I will."

Delphine stowed groceries, put a bottle of white wine to chill in the refrigerator, and contemplated her apartment. It was tidy. It usually was. There wasn't much to do in terms of cleaning, but Delphine felt compelled to roll a duster over surfaces, run the vacuum over the carpets, arrange sofa pillows, part the curtains to an aesthetically artful degree, straighten books on the shelves, and pass a rag over tiles and surfaces.

Almost as an afterthought Delphine changed the sheets on the bed.

The call caught Delphine contemplating starting dinner preparations. The name on the screen hastened her to answer.

"Cosima?" Delphine said. "Is everything okay?"

"Hey, are you busy?" Cosima asked.

Delphine hesitated. "Are you alright? Do you need my help?"

"You could say that," Cosima said. "You should come over."
"To your place? Now?" Delphine asked.

"Why, you have plans?" Cosima inquired.

"Will this take long?" Delphine pressed.

"I guess that depends on you," Cosima said in the same cryptic manner.

Delphine checked the time. If attending to Cosima took no more than an hour, Delphine could return in time to prepare dinner. More than an hour, Delphine would have to resort to takeout. Perhaps not her best foot forward, but not the end of the world. Any more than that—

There was no time to waste.

"I'll be there soon."

The moment Cosima opened the door, Delphine's stomach sank.

"You the one helpin' Cos?" the other woman in the apartment said in an accent that was clearly not North American.


Delphine turned to Cosima. "What's going on?"

"Nice to meet you, too," Sarah said wryly.

"I'm sorry," Delphine said to Sarah. "I wasn't expecting this."

"You know who I am?" Sarah asked warily. She had a bounce to her person, the impression of a spring tightly wound, as if someone had turned up Cosima's paranoid energy beyond the maximum ticks of a dial.

"I told Sarah," Cosima said, stepping between Delphine and Sarah, though Sarah kept her distance, "that we should consider bringing you in on this."

"On what?" Delphine asked.

"Do you remember this?" Cosima asked, procuring from her back pocket a folded piece of paper.

Delphine plucked it from Cosima's fingers and unfolded it. The paper fluttered in her grip. It was a poorly pixelated, blown-up print out of a photograph with enough detail preserved to depict two scientists and a blurry, bulky, darkly dressed and armed humanoid figure in the background.

Delphine nodded. "This is the picture Aldous showed us."

"He called these scientists 'forefathers' of the experiment," Cosima said.

Arms folded, with the air of the sentry in the photograph, Sarah watched them both warily.

"They're supposed to be dead," Cosima continued.

"Except one's not," Sarah said.

Delphine looked between them.

"We—Sarah found him," Cosima added. Delphine stared at her. "He might be the key to helping
"Then bring him into the DYAD," Delphine said. "We will work with him."

"Yeah, that's not happening," Sarah said. "I'm not handing DYAD the keys to making more of us."

Delphine stared at Sarah with open astonishment, then turned to Cosima. Cosima avoided her eyes. Delphine inhaled sharply and exhaled much more steadily. "How do you expect him to help us?"

Cosima shook her head. "He's a geneticist. He's the geneticist. He knows our code. If there's anyone who could untangle the mess and point us to the synthetic sequences, it's him."

"It's been thirty years," Delphine pointed out. "Where has he been this whole time?"

"Hiding," Sarah chimed in. "From DYAD, the people trying to kill him."

"Why would the DYAD try to kill him?" Delphine asked, feeling completely lost.

"'Cause he knows too much," Sarah said.

"Yes," Delphine agreed. "He knows what they want to know, what they've lost." She closed her eyes and shook her head. Opening her eyes, she addressed Cosima, "I don't understand what you expect me to do if you won't bring this man into the DYAD."

"Do you remember when I asked you if you'd be willing to leave DYAD?"

Delphine stanchured a laugh. "You want to propose that we leave the DYAD and work with—with this man who is supposed to be dead? With what resources, Cosima? With what money? This man could tell you the secrets of your molecular universe but what good is it if we don't have the means to synthesize the vectors to cure you? Do you even know if he can help?"

"You want to ask him?" Sarah asked.

Delphine stood derailed. "What?"

"You want to meet him?" Sarah asked.

"Now?" Delphine gasped.

"Sarah," Cosima warned.

"You said we could trust her, Cos."

"I said maybe we could trust her," Cosima clarified with a nervous glance at Delphine.

"Well, she knows now," Sarah said, eyes on Delphine. "How do we know she's not gonna blab to Leekie the second she leaves?"

"Sarah!" Cosima said sharply as Delphine gasped, "What—"

"Yeah, let's all have a chat," Sarah said, eyes unwavering on Delphine. "I want to know she knows what's at stake."

* *

They piled into a truck that had endured the trials of many days. Cosima sat in the middle. Delphine
had considered refusing to go with them but the feral wariness coiled in Sarah's person and the hostility in her hard gaze scrambled Delphine's ability to predict her response. There seemed to be a real possibility that Sarah Manning would haul Delphine bodily and resisting the whole way. Or unconscious, if that were easier.

It wasn't a type of danger Delphine had considered might come from Cosima, but seeing Sarah prompted a reconsideration of the measures to which Cosima might be capable of resorting.

Sarah didn't seem particularly concerned that sitting on the end gave Delphine access to the door in case Delphine decided to eject herself. Not that Delphine would do so, even in these circumstances, and maybe Sarah perceived that. Delphine did take an opportunity to point out, "If you're worried I'll share information with Dr. Leekie, then shouldn't you ensure that I know less?"

Sarah smirked.

"If there is a message you want me to give Aldous Leekie," Delphine said carefully, "I can give it to him."

"This isn't about Leekie," Sarah said curtly.

Cosima's attention ping ponged between the two of them, but she contributed nothing.

Meanwhile the time on the dashboard ticked up in parallel with Delphine's mounting anxiety.

The rowhouse Sarah parked in front of served as momentary distraction. Sarah hopped out of the car so Delphine followed her example. With Sarah leading, Delphine proceeded through the small gate and down the walk to the front door with hesitation derived from fascination.

"You better let me go first," Sarah said. Her fist fell on the wood with confidence as Sarah called out, "It's me, Sarah!"

The door opened and Sarah stepped inside, followed by Cosima, leaving Delphine to venture inside last.

The sight of a rifle pointed at her made Delphine freeze and put her hands up, too shocked to proclaim her harmlessness.

"She's with us, S," Sarah said.

There was the pitter patter of feet on the stairs. Delphine dared to look away toward the noise and beheld the child.

The woman holding the rifle glanced over her shoulder. "Luv, I told you to stay upstairs."

Another non-native accent. Not the same as Sarah's.

The girl—Kira, Delphine recalled, it had to be Kira—studied Delphine with parts speculation and skepticism and concluded, "She doesn't look dangerous."

"I'm not dangerous," Delphine agreed. "Hello."

Delphine's greeting rendered the child shy. She ducked her head and grabbed onto the railing of the stair.

"My name is Delphine," Delphine said. Kira had her mother's hair. When Kira raised her head, Delphine added Sarah's disconcerting stare to the traits she inherited.
"Go on upstairs, Monkey," Sarah said, eyeing Delphine critically. "I'll be up soon, yeah?"

"Come in," the woman said gruffly, lowering the rifle, "and close the door."

As Kira turned reluctantly to obey her mother's instructions, Delphine complied with the ones given to her. The woman assessed Delphine with a distinct air of being unimpressed.

"What's all this?" the woman asked Sarah.

"Mrs. S, this is Dr. Delphine Cormier," Cosima rushed to intercede. At last. "She works with me. She works for DYAD."

The woman, Mrs. S, gripped the rifle as if contemplating raising it back up.

"I was brought here against my will if that makes any difference," Delphine said quickly.

"You don't look like a prisoner to me," Mrs. S remarked with a head-to-toe assessment. She turned a wry eye on Sarah. "Why would you bring her against her will?"

"To meet Duncan," Sarah said plainly.

"What nonsense is rolling around in that head?" Mrs. S demanded. "What good will that serve?"

Sarah ignored her interrogator and motioned Delphine over. Cosima fell into step with Delphine and together they crossed from foyer into the living room, the short length of wall separating the two spaces sustaining the anxiety and anticipation roiling in Delphine's middle. On the couch sat a tall, lanky-limbed, silver-haired man attending to a cup of tea. He did not heed the least bit of attention to any of them.

"Hi, Professor Duncan," Cosima said, throwing up a little wave.

The sound of Cosima's voice coaxed the man's notice. His head came up and his eyes found Cosima. He animated into a smile. "Cosima. Hello again. I told you, just Ethan is fine. How are you feeling today?"

"Doing okay," Cosima said with a nervous smile.

"You've already met?" Delphine asked lowly. "When?"

"Last night," Cosima muttered back. Raising her voice, she said, "Professor Duncan, this is Delphine Cormier. She's an immunologist. She works for DYAD."

Delphine stepped forward and extended a hand but the eyes behind the glasses narrowed on her. "To whom in DYAD do you answer?"

Delphine retracted her hand after an awkward pause and said, hesitantly, "Aldous Leekie."

Professor Duncan's features darkened. "No." He shook his head. "No."

"Hey, hey," Mrs. S said, not in a tone Delphine would have deemed kindly. "Easy there."

"Oi," Sarah said, considerably even less gently, "she wants to help us. She's working on a cure. For the disease you're responsible for giving us."

Professor Duncan collected his agitation and scrutinized Delphine. "Are you a Neolutionist?"
Delphine blinked. She felt everyone's attention on her. "Do you mean do I ascribe to the philosophy of Neolutionism?"

"No, I mean are you a Neolutionist? Are you one of those—those deplorable lackeys?"

Delphine shook her head. "I . . . don't know what you mean by that."

"So you aren't aware of the Neolutionist infiltration of DYAD?" Professor Duncan demanded.

Delphine looked to Cosima, then to Sarah, but they simply stared back at her with a disconcerting similarity of expressions of expectation. "I . . . I don't know. I don't know what that means."

"The Neolutionists killed my wife," Professor Duncan said, anger thinning his tone into brittle. "Leekie killed my wife. Did he send you here to kill me?"

Delphine stood stunned. "Why would they want to kill you? You're the architect of the experiment. They lost all the original information and have been scouring for it since."

"Because we threatened to expose them," Professor Duncan said with the weight of the years coming to lie upon him. "Because we wanted to leave and take our Rachel with us."

"Rachel?" Delphine said before the pieces clicked. Rachel. Rachel Duncan. "Rachel was your daughter?"

"You know Rachel?" Professor Duncan asked.

Delphine shook her head in the negative. "I don't."

Professor Duncan appeared to deflate. "I'd like to see my daughter."

Delphine's mind attempted to construct an image of the woman of poise and pretension beside the grandfatherly man whose faculties appeared broken and addled and found the juxtaposition incongruous. Delphine swallowed. "Professor Duncan, can you pinpoint the sequences in the clones' genetic code that could be causing the autoimmune disease we see afflicting so many of them?"

Professor Duncan shook his head. "They'll steal it."

"Steal what?" Delphine asked.

"The codes," Professor Duncan said. "The ones that provided the breakthrough."

"You . . . you have the codes?" Delphine said, shocked.

Professor Duncan frowned as if Delphine were a vexing student. "Isn't that what you asked for? Isn't that what you're here for?"

Delphine turned to Cosima, dazed. In the process, her eye glimpsed the clock on the mantle.

Seized with an unthinking panic, Delphine fumbled for the pocket housing her phone.

Pandemonium erupted. Shouts rang out, a small, blunt object pressed into Delphine's spine, Sarah leapt back, hand out, and tea sloshed over the edge of Professor Duncan's cup, splashing onto a pants leg and eliciting a cry.

Delphine went very, very still.
"I need to make a phone call," Delphine said.

"Who you callin'?'" Sarah demanded.

"I had plans tonight," Delphine said. "I'm not going to make it. I need to cancel."

"Go on, then," Mrs. S said from behind Delphine. The press of the muzzle on Delphine's spine didn't budge.

Delphine removed her phone with exaggerated movements. "May I step out for a moment?"

"No, you go ahead and make your call here," Mrs. S said.

"I'm just calling a friend."

"You have those?" Sarah wondered.

"Shay?" Cosima asked.

"Yes," Delphine answered Cosima with an exasperated look.

"Show me," Cosima said.

Delphine angled the phone so that Cosima could see the screen. She pulled up Shay's contact information and hit call.

"Put it on speaker," Sarah said.

Delphine responded with a flat stare of resistance but Sarah gazed back unfazed. The rifle remained pressed to her back. Delphine's thumb hovered then descended on the speakerphone icon. Ringing filled the air.

"Hello?" Shay answered.

"Hey, Shay," Delphine said, holding up the phone so that she could speak into the microphone. Sweat trickled down her neck. Its path left a trail of chilliness. "Something came up suddenly. I'm afraid I have to cancel dinner."

A beat of dead air played in the crowded room. "Is everything okay?"

"Yes," Delphine said, wondering if Shay could hear her nervousness. "But something occurred that needs my attention."

"Work?" Shay asked.

Delphine hesitated. "Yes."

"Okay," Shay breathed and Delphine heard the resignation. "Sure. You caught me just as I was heading out, so I'm glad you called." A second of silence from Shay's end, then she said, "Don't work too hard, okay?"

"I won't," Delphine said. "I'll call you later?"

"Yeah. Sure."

"Bye," Delphine said softly, wanting to say more, not willing to bare herself to this audience.
"Bye."

Sarah raised an eyebrow. The barrel eased away from its indentation in Delphine's back. Delphine lowered her phone and stared down at it.

"Who's Shay?" Sarah asked Cosima.

"She is who Delphine says she is—she's Delphine's friend. She lives in my building."

"What?" Sarah said, bewildered.

Cosima shook her head and waved off Sarah. "Long story, beside the point." Cosima turned to Delphine. "You see what we mean now."

Delphine remained intent on the screen of her phone, which had powered down into reflective blankness. "You think that if we bring Professor Duncan into the DYAD, they will kill him. If they do not kill him, they will appropriate his work to continue the project."

"We need to work outside of DYAD," Cosima concluded.

Delphine raised her head. "Professor Duncan, do you have a secret private lab?"

From behind Delphine Mrs. S loosed a hearty laugh. "Maybe if you dig enough, you might find one in his house."

Sarah crossed her arms and shook her head.

Delphine looked around. "I don't have a lab. And where would that leave the others? Your—sisters. How would we help them?" Delphine addressed Cosima. "It is always the same questions. I haven't found the answers yet. Have you?" Delphine met Sarah's eyes. "Did Cosima talk to you? Did she discuss the stem cell line with you?"

"We don't know if that's working yet," Cosima said tersely.

"Are you ill?" Delphine asked Sarah.

"She might be immune," Cosima muttered.

"What?" Delphine exclaimed, whirling. "Why didn't you mention this? If that's true, if a mutation protects Sarah, it's possible Sarah could donate her bone marrow to you. There would be no need to . . ."

"To use my daughter?" Sarah finished testily. "Yeah, Cos mentioned it. A helluva lot nicer than you did just now."

Delphine rubbed at her brow. She didn't apologize. She wasn't feeling generous enough for that.

"What if Duncan just gives you the information?" Sarah asked. "Could you work with that?"

"You mean work with it and yet keep it hidden from the DYAD?" Delphine asked. "I have no doubt that things would go much more quickly and smoothly if we could collaborate directly with Professor Duncan, but even if we could . . . smuggle in Professor Duncan's knowledge, the DYAD will most likely still see the work in the results. If I present a cure to Aldous to disseminate to the others, he's going to have questions. That's supposing the systems aren't compromised in and of themselves."
"Which makes the case for why we can't use DYAD labs," Sarah concluded.

Delphine heaved a sigh and spread her hands in helpless entreaty. "Theoretically, if they lost the foundational data of the project, rebuilding their database must be one of the primary goals. It would be mine. But that is beyond the purview of my assignment. My task is to formulate a cure."

"And to spy on Cosima," Sarah added. Delphine's jaw stiffened. "This is where we tell you that you can't breathe a word of this to anyone."

Delphine stared at Sarah. Their impasse stretched out. Delphine paused it with a raised finger. Not the middle one. "One moment." She arranged and translated her thoughts, a jumble of French and English in her agitation. "Sarah, the DYAD knows who you are. They could very well be keeping surveillance on you. We might be under surveillance as we speak. They could know that you are keeping Professor Duncan here. You brought me here, in plain day—what am I supposed to say if I'm confronted? I'm sorry, I don't know what you're talking about? Aldous was the one who showed me and Cosima that picture and told us a story about losing the Professors in a fire—if he did try to kill the Duncans and discovers one of them is alive, he will want to get in front of this before anyone else finds out."

Delphine said the words but it took a second for the sheer possibility of the scenario to hit her. She looked at Sarah, then Cosima.

"Aldous knows," Delphine gasped. Incredulity jerked her lips into a parody of a smile. "Aldous knows. He keeps asking me if you've said anything—because he knows about Professor Duncan."

Sarah's mouth twitched. "This one's definitely DYAD, innit she?"

Delphine pivoted so that Mrs. S stood encompassed in her range of vision. "Do you want me to tell Aldous? Is that why you brought me here? Test me as a mole and feed me the information you want passed on?"

"No," Mrs. S said, "we're not ready to play that card yet."

"Then why did you bring me here?" Delphine asked, exasperated.

"Because," drawled Sarah, "Cos said to give you a chance first. That maybe you'd have a way to work around DYAD."

"Work around the DYAD how? Before what else happens?" Delphine asked.

"I think this meeting is at an end," announced Mrs. S.

Delphine looked searchingly about at all the faces, at wit's end. "That's it?"

Professor Duncan stood up. Everyone turned toward the motion. He stepped toward Delphine and held out his hand. "It was nice to meet you, Dr. Cormier."

After a stunned moment, Delphine put her hand into his.

"You seem like you aren't in their clutches yet. Don't let the Neolutionists get you," he said genially.

His hand slipped out of Delphine's. Delphine barely noticed.

"Nice meeting you, Doc," Sarah said when she dropped off Delphine and Cosima.
Delphine held the door open and turned to face Sarah. "It is possible that a transplant of your bone marrow could help Cosima—if you are, in fact, immune and you two are compatible. Whether or not the stem cells from—from your daughter—are working, they are a temporary measure at best."

"This transplant," Sarah said, "could it cure Cos?"

"It might," Delphine said, "but we'd have to see. The first step would be determining compatibility."

"Meaning tests and shite," Sarah said.

Delphine nodded.

"Don't you already have all that on file?" Sarah asked. "DYAD poked and prodded me once thinking I was—one of the others."

Delphine paused. "I don't know. We would still want to run an HLA tissue typing test to confirm compatibility."

"Cos and I are practically twins, aren't we?" Sarah said.

"Clearly something is different, if you are immune," Delphine pointed out.

"How's that gonna help all of them?" Sarah posed.

Delphine shook her head. "I'm not sure it could. But it could buy time. For Cosima, at least."

Consideration and consternation sat upon Sarah's features in an unbalancing mix. "We'll get back to you on that."

"Better sooner than later," Delphine said, "for Cosima's sake."

Sarah frowned.

A heavy sigh drew the attention of both of them.

"Could you not talk about me like I'm not here?" Cosima groused.

Sarah smirked and threw up a wave. "Later, Cos."

"Call me," Cosima said.

When the truck receded down the street, Delphine said to Cosima, "May I come up?"

Cosima breathed out a puff of a chuckle. "You want to come up?"

Delphine did not laugh. She did not smile. She peered, eyes narrowed, into the distance to avoid looking, just then, at Cosima.

Cosima parsed Delphine's expression and, sobered, said, "Alright."

Delphine hadn't yet determined the content of her opening salvo when Cosima closed the door. Anger and logic vied and bled into one another in a struggle difficult to unravel and from which to extricate sense. It was pointless, logic said, to quibble about the ambush—that was almost a given now in the cloak-and-dagger opera of the DYAD's covert and extra-legal affairs. It wouldn't serve to put Cosima on the defensive. It was never a guarantee Cosima would cooperate at the best of times. Then again, Delphine was irate.
Delphine exhaled in a sharp burst. "What is Sarah planning?"

Cosima glanced nervously in her direction.

Delphine kneaded at her brow. "Just tell me, Cosima."

"As far as I understand it, they want to try shaking things up in the DYAD," Cosima said cautiously.

"Shake things up how?" Delphine pressed, heart sinking.

"Rachel doesn't know that Leekie killed her parents," Cosima said.

Delphine let that sink in. "So they plan to tell her and—what? What happens? Leekie is demoted? Then what? Rachel takes his place? She's supposed to be the better choice?" Delphine paced in a tight circle, hands planting on her hips. Coming back around, Delphine confronted Cosima. "How does this help? I'm not sure we would call him a good man, but Aldous at least cares for the clones on some level. Rachel—Rachel is willing to put any of you on the chopping block. You know that. First hand. She halted development for the stem cell treatment to get back at Sarah."

"Leekie played us on that, too," Cosima shot back.

"But at least it was in the spirit of helping you," Delphine argued.

"Defending Leekie again?" Cosima spat with plain accusation.

Delphine buried her hands in her hair and briefly stepped away. She circled back calmer. "This is rash, Cosima. You know it. You don't know how this could play out. You need to tell Sarah that."

"Look, I can see where they're coming from," Cosima said, gesticulating with emphasis. "Duncan doesn't trust Leekie. If Leekie is removed and Rachel takes his place, maybe we gain an ally in the upper echelons of DYAD management and we can bring Duncan into the DYAD and we can all work together."

"How does that eliminate any of the concerns regarding the DYAD reacquiring all the science?" countered Delphine.

"I don't know, but it's the best we've got right now. As you're so fond of reminding me, we don't exactly have a generous timetable that lets us twiddle our thumbs!"

Delphine covered her face with her hands. Hands dropping, she said, "What if I could find another way? What if there were another party that might be able to provide the resources we need?"

"Another party?" Cosima asked warily. "Like the military?"

Delphine shook her head. "I'm not exactly sure myself what they are—or what they want."

Cosima's eyes narrowed on Delphine. "How do you know about this other party? Have you been talking to outside groups?"

"Will you delay Sarah or not to give me time?" Delphine asked.

"How do you know if you can trust these people?" Cosima asked.

"How do you know if you can trust Professor Duncan?" quipped Delphine. "How do I know one of Sarah's associates isn't going to find me and shoot me?"
"Yeah," Cosima muttered, "they take Kira's safety pretty seriously."

"And I take this seriously," asserted Delphine. "You have to trust me."

"You understand that the idea of the news of Duncan's continued existence spreading around isn't enticing?" Cosima said.

"If Aldous knows," Delphine said, "there is a good chance this knowledge is already spreading. The issue will not be containment, but getting ahead of it—what I think Aldous is trying to do."

"You think Rachel knows?" Cosima asked.

"Now that I know what has him so agitated, I think Aldous is eager to ensure that Rachel doesn't find out."

Cosima's jaw worked. "I can try to stall Sarah, but you need to make something happen fast. Sarah doesn't really do sitting still."

Delphine nodded. "Expect to hear from me." She checked her impulse to rush out the door. "How are you feeling?"

"Fine," Cosima said. "I'm on the oxygen like you told me to be."

Delphine's respiration evened out, calmed by the humdrum exchange.

"Sorry for interrupting your plans," Cosima said, avoiding her eyes.

"Yeah, me too," Delphine said on the cusp of a sigh. She regarded her shoes for a second. "Thank you for not keeping me in the dark."

"Fair exchange?" Cosima probed feebly.

Delphine checked a frown. "We'll see." She saw herself to the door. "Ciao."

"Bye," Cosima managed.

*

Delphine retreated to her car and sat behind the wheel, phone in hand.

She placed the call.

"Hello. My name is Delphine Cormier. I'm trying to reach Dr. Marion Bowles. Please inform her that there is matter of urgency I need to discuss with her. May I leave my number?"

*

Delphine pressed her forehead to the corridor wall and let the wall bear the weight of her heavy heart. With each step from the car she'd felt her confidence retreating and the granular sands of reality riding in to supplant its place until she felt encumbered with the burden of the ranging scope from which all the doubts and worries hailed.

It was six-thirty.

Her knock fell on the door like a timorous question.
Shay opened the door and started. "Delphine." Shay's face pinched. "Was it Cosima? Is she alright?"

"She's fine," Delphine said. "Have you eaten? Would you like to get dinner?"

Shay leaned against the door.

"Or a walk?" Delphine asked. "Would you like to go for a walk?"

"You don't have to do this, Delphine," Shay said softly.

Delphine shook her head, her lips twitching in pained helplessness. "This is the only thing I want to do today."

Shay bowed her head. "Let me put on shoes and get my coat."

Outside was darkness and winter's deepening chill. They set off down the street walking side-by-side, to Delphine in an aimless direction, trusting Shay to know and track their location and route. After a block's length the distance between them gnawed at Delphine's awareness. She glanced furtively at the bulge in Shay's coat where Shay's hand was stowed away in the pocket.

Straightaway Shay exposed her hand to the elements and reached for Delphine, fingers curling beneath Delphine's palm, then sliding into Delphine's grip. Delphine spread her fingers. Shay, lips affected with a faint curl, interlaced her fingers through Delphine's.

A thrill of warmth and a rush of relief commingled in Delphine's blood in commensurate amounts.

They walked straight for a time, block after block, until Shay gently pulled Delphine to the right around a corner. The new street they traversed marked the border of an unexpected park and at the corner where it concluded, Shay directed Delphine toward a bright green facade.

"Is vegan okay?" Shay asked.

"Anything."

"Thank you for being accommodating," Shay said, a chuckle in her voice, "but I want you to enjoy a good meal, too. You look like you're overdue for one."

As long as I can hold your hand, Delphine almost said, which aligned with the teasing she regularly employed on Shay, but rather than light-hearted it felt too close to the surface of a keen desire. "Vegan is fine."

As they entered, Delphine's grip tightened in anticipation of Shay pulling away. Pressure on her hand answered—Shay squeezed back. Waiting to be seated, Shay's hand snug in hers, Delphine marveled that after such a day she felt, in this moment, as if there were nowhere else she'd rather be.

It made Delphine feel awful.

The small tables in the establishment forced a separation to seat them across from one another. Shay took her time settling, keeping an eye on Delphine.

Delphine was dimly aware of discussing the menu, even issuing an exclamation over the presence of "tacos" and "burgers," and chose a wrap she could not have described when it came time to order. Silence ensued at the table.

Not in Delphine's mind.
Shay said nothing and asked her nothing.

An appetizer arrived that Delphine didn't expect but that Shay had clearly ordered and that Delphine could only describe as a thin, crispy roll filled with . . . something that couldn't possibly be meat. The platter was served with a trio of sauces.

"Dosa," Shay explained. "Try it. It's Indian. I wish they also served fried bread here. That stuff is sinfully good."

The first bite crunched in Delphine's mouth and then spread the curry across Delphine's tongue. More than that, it triggered Delphine's appetite. The pressure of her thoughts eased.

"Good?" Shay asked tentatively.

"Interesting," granted Delphine.

"Try it with the sauces," Shay urged with a smile.

Delphine felt her mouth smile back.

Shay offered Delphine one of her tacos—of course Shay ordered tacos—and Delphine split the wrap. Two-thirds of the way to clearing her plate, Delphine was reduced to picking at the innards with her fork. She took a sip of water and when she put the glass down Shay reached out and brushed the back of her fingers across Delphine's knuckles. Delphine turned her hand palm up upon the table and Shay's fingers alighted atop hers. Delphine curled her fingers, capturing Shay.

"I'm sorry about dinner," Delphine said to Shay's hand.

"You called before I got out the door," Shay pointed out. "Any inconvenience was minimized."

Delphine fought against a frown, concentrating on the sensation of her thumb running over Shay's fingers. "I feel like I failed a major first exam."

There was a length of silence without reply during which Delphine kept her eyes cast down.

"Do French schools not offer make-up exams?" Shay asked at last. Delphine dared a look at Shay's face. A soft smile painted Shay's lips, but there was a lining of sorrow to it. Around her eyes.

"Starting by giving the impression of unreliability was the last thing I wanted to do," Delphine said softly.

Shay exhaled, then tugged lightly at the tips of Delphine's fingers. "I'll admit that maybe a part of me felt like that, too, at first. But, I reminded myself that you haven't flaked for ninety-five percent of the time that we've known each other and whatever needed your attention sounded important—or at least something that had you stressed. And. There's the fact that you're here right now—eating vegan food because I brought you here."

Delphine grappled with the muscles of her face, loath to let loose the heaviness of her mood. "I know you have concerns. Fears. I did not want to give you any reason to listen to them."

Shay filled her lungs to capacity and exhaled long and quietly.

"I'm afraid as well," Delphine confessed. "But I know that my fears and your fears are different. I'm not afraid of the yearning I have to see you or wanting to hold your hand. Because I know I want
these things—I now have the perspective to define them as what they are. The prospect of exploring them makes me eager. These are the things I want to show you not to doubt."

Shay studied Delphine. "Then what are you afraid of?"

The point of a firearm pressed against her spine. Clandestine meetings and phone calls. A contingent of clones conspiring against the conspiracy that conceived them. Herself caught in the middle with nowhere to turn and the sword of Damocles of a disease hanging above her head.

Rejection. From Shay.

Loss. Of Shay.

Failure. To Shay.

That the truth would sit between them forever a chasm unplumbed and studiously ignored and bridged with polite fiction, or, worse, that the truth would rise like a mountain insurmountable and obfuscating, a wedge that would propel them apart, or, the worst, that the truth through association with Delphine would ensnare Shay in its clutches and subsume her into the games of uncertainty and danger.

"I'm afraid that work will demand more of my time and that I will be called away unexpectedly more often like I was today. I'm worried the demands of my work will . . . impact your life." Delphine pressed her lips together. "I don't want to disappoint you."

Shay nodded. "That sounds reasonable—and not catastrophic. We don't have to see each other everyday."

"I would—like to see you everyday."

Shay scoffed lightly. "That's the newness talking."

"You don't want to see me everyday?" Delphine posed with uncertain caution.

Shay descended into a pit of silence.

"Shay?"

Shay shook her head, wearing a small smile. "Sorry, I couldn't decide if we were being so serious that I couldn't tease you."

"Would you be teasing me by saying you do want to see me everyday or that you don't want to see me everyday?" Delphine asked.

Shay's eyes flashed, her smile pulling with exasperation. "And now you're teasing me. Which is unfair since I elected not to tease you."

"Is it unfair when you are not answering my question?" countered Delphine.

Shay ducked her gaze to contemplate their hands and worried at her lower lip. "I'll admit I was disappointed when you called. I was . . . " Shay raised her eyes. " . . . looking forward to it."

Delphine nodded. "So was I. I want to invite you over tomorrow, but . . . there's a good chance work matters will require my attention."

"There will be other days after tomorrow," Shay said. "I can come over on one of those. There's no
Shay's tone was soothing, but also subdued. Delphine considered withdrawing her hand. She swallowed. "Shay . . . I don't want you to feel obligated to come over if that's not what you want."

From Shay emanated silence, then she huffed into a self-deprecating smile. "I want to. I—I'm still trying to accept that you kissed me last night and that it wasn't a wild dream. Can you understand that from where I'm standing, it looks like you went from zero to one hundred?"

"That," Delphine said slowly, "might not be entirely inaccurate as to how it feels. But it's more like . . . I was looking at a beautiful picture and I thought I was looking at all of it—but I turned around and there was a whole world around me that had been there but that I only then noticed. And now I must examine and explore everything I've been missing."

A smile gradually stole across Shay's lips. "I expected that to turn out more science-y, to be honest."

Delphine chuckled. "The research and exploration aspects weren't enough?" Delphine rubbed Shay's fingers between her own. "How does it feel to you?"

Shay's eyebrows flicked up. "Like . . . I've been coasting at fifty and I'm not sure if it's a good idea to put my foot down on the accelerator and speed up or if there's a cop around the next bend who's going to pull me over for going over the speed limit."

"Fifty," Delphine muttered.

"Like fifty percent. I never saw myself being more than your friend," Shay said. "You never hinted you'd even considered the possibility of more."

"I hadn't," Delphine conceded. "Not consciously."

Shay's expression slackened. "I know there's a lot on your plate right now. Today proved that. You might be feeling overwhelmed, like maybe some things are slipping away." Shay shrugged. "I'm not. I'm here."

Delphine tilted her head. "You're suggesting that I'm making a leap into a romantic overture because I'm compensating for other outside circumstances beyond my control?"

Shay's carefully neutral expression confirmed Delphine's interpretation.

Out of respect, Delphine contemplated the possibility. Her brow furrowed in the effort. "But how would I know? Wouldn't that feel closer to desperation? What I felt when I woke up this morning was as if—as if every switch in my mind had been turned on. And when I realized that I would have to cancel, it was like a hand slamming all those switches down. Now being here with you feels like they are flipping back up, one by one. I think about being able to do this tomorrow and the day after and the day after that and—it looks so much brighter."

"Yeah?" Shay asked, voice low and soft. "But you've looked pretty sad tonight."

"Because I keep thinking maybe I can't wish for that," Delphine confessed. "That I can't have that."

Or that something was bound to occur that would render having tasted the possibilities as worse than having never had it at all.

"Because of me?" Shay asked. "Because I seem reluctant?"

"Ah."

"Does that add to your concerns?" asked Delphine.

Shay gazed off toward the bar for a moment. "If I were looking to make mountains out of molehills, yeah, it would."

"What does that mean?"

"It means to make something look bigger than it is—in this case, I mean that if I were looking for reasons to be concerned, I could make a big issue out of this. But I've known your life is busy and complicated and way more stressful than I even imagined. The only thing that could change to make it a problem for me would be my perception of it . . . and my expectations of you, what I think it would mean for you to make time for me as your partner rather than just as your friend."

"Is that what you've been thinking about?"

Shay smirked. "Actually, since you scolded me about reaching premature conclusions, I've been telling myself not to get ahead of myself." Her eyes skimmed lightly over Delphine's features. "I told you I was disappointed when you cancelled. I was surprised I was."

"Maybe . . . maybe we can attempt lunch tomorrow instead."

Shay's expression crumpled into confusion. "Are you suggesting lunch because you think there won't be any interruptions earlier in the day?"

"Yes," Delphine admitted baldly. "I'm hoping that if there are any disturbances that they won't intrude until the afternoon. Out of consideration. Unlike today."

Shay laughed and it wasn't polite and it wasn't sad and it wasn't restrained. "It's okay if you're busy this weekend. You're allowed to be busy this weekend. I understand."

"Okay," breathed Delphine, defeated by sense and the sure prediction that Marion Bowles would, in fact, be terribly prompt. "How about Monday?"

"Oh my God," Shay guffawed. "Put that aside for a moment. Do you want dessert?"

"No, thank you. Now back to my question."

Shay laughed. "We'll figure it out. Okay? Promise."

They would figure it out.

Delphine smiled. "It's a promise."

* *

"Do you want to come in?" Shay asked at her door. "There's wine and whiskey. Does whiskey go bad?"

Delphine touched Shay's chin. "Thank you."

She leaned down and pressed her lips to Shay's.
Shay covered Delphine's hand, lips parting.

Delphine took the invitation to a slow dance.

When Delphine pulled away, her blood sang, pulse aflutter.

Shay looked faintly dazed. Like Delphine felt.

Delphine stroked Shay's cheek. "Slow?"

Still gripping Delphine's wrist, Shay nodded. "Yeah. Slow."

"Then thank you for coming out to dinner with me tonight. Good night, Shay."

Perhaps something like regret flitted through Shay's gaze, but then she smiled, with unfurling wonder, as if amazed, and then softly, with tenderness. "Thank you for dinner. Good night."

It required will but Delphine mustered the resolution to step away. There was tomorrow and the day after that and the day after that. All days they could see each other again.

Chapter End Notes

Thank you to all the responses to the last chapter. This readership is the cutest. :)

Chapter 38

Delphine's phone heralded the summons of unknown number on the cusp of noon. Leery but expectant, Delphine answered. "Hello. Dr. Cormier speaking."

"Good morning, doctor," greeted the indisputable voice of Marion Bowles. "Are you indisposed at the moment?"

"No," Delphine replied. A bitter parcel of her conscience noted it was proving fortunate that Shay had not let her insist on extending her invitation to Sunday.

"Are you available to talk?" Marion Bowles queried.

"Yes."

"Then come downstairs. To the garage."

The town car idled where Delphine expected it—behind her own car in its assigned parking space. The driver, not one whom Delphine recognized but suited and imposing all the same, stepped out to open the back door for Delphine. Delphine slipped inside.

Dr. Bowles smiled at her. "Your timing is impeccable, Dr. Cormier."

"What do you mean?" Delphine asked cautiously.

"I received your message just as I was intending to reach out to you."

"For what reason?" inquired Delphine.

"This is your meeting now," Dr. Bowles chided. "You mentioned an urgent matter."

Marion Bowles's gently delivered admonishment sounded like a benevolent attempt to place control of the conversation in Delphine's hands, but Delphine was aware they served to back her into a corner. Delphine took a moment to craft her pitch. "Dr. Bowles, have I understood correctly that you are not an employee of the DYAD?"

One sculpted eyebrow lifted. "This is an interesting beginning, Dr. Cormier."

"What I say next hinges on clarifying this point."

Dr. Bowles regarded Delphine with opaque consideration. "You're a bright young woman. What have you concluded?"

Delphine gave a slight shake of her head. "You are somehow affiliated with the DYAD and have access to some of the DYAD's most confidential data, but you have described yourself only as a consultant. You're interested in the behavior of DYAD's personnel and administrators, but show little to indicate you care about the substance of the actual work. I don't know what you are, Dr. Bowles."

Dr. Bowles's mouth dug in at the corners at the start of Delphine's answer and at the finish had unfurled into a full smile.

"Human, to start," Dr. Bowles declared. A joke. It was not the response Delphine was expecting and it unsettled a buzz of nerves at the base of Delphine's skull. Dr. Bowles sighed. "Aldous has done poorly to neglect you, but he's always lacked as a mentor. Unfortunately for us." Dr. Bowles clasped
her hands together and settled them upon her lap. "It's no surprise, really, that he's the problem. You're here because you wish to work around Aldous. Whatever your urgent matter is, you don't want to take it up with him."

Delphine resisted the urge to fidget, to wet her lips, to cross her legs, to fold her hands in a mirror of Dr. Bowles's self-possessed nonchalance. Dr. Bowles had yet to clarify her position.

As if reading Delphine's thoughts, or at least her reluctance, Dr. Bowles said, "I don't blame you for your caution. I encourage it. But if you won't proceed, then let's move on to a matter I'm curious about. Does the name Ethan Duncan mean anything to you?"

Something would have betrayed Delphine's knowledge—a tic at the corner of her eye, the slightest dimpling around her mouth, the twitch of her fingers, the clench of her gut—and none of it mattered because Delphine harbored no doubt that Dr. Bowles possessed the answer.

"I think a meeting is in order," Dr. Bowles said carefully without waiting for Delphine's input. "I'm here to ask you to arrange one, Dr. Cormier."

"I cannot arrange a meeting between you and Professor Duncan," Delphine said.

"I don't wish to meet with him," Dr. Bowles replied easily. "I need to sit down with Sarah Manning. Cosima, as well, if she's willing. But if no one else, Sarah."

Delphine pushed an impulse forward. "Why do you want to speak with Sarah?"

"That will be between Sarah and me."

"I'm not sure telling Sarah that will tempt her to meet you."

"Sarah has her back against a wall. She needs allies but she won't find any by making enemies of everyone."

"That doesn't explain what you want from Sarah."

Dr. Bowles smiled.

"She will ask," Delphine pointed out.

Dr. Bowles volunteered nothing. There would be no answer from that quarter. Which left Delphine armed with no cards in a situation where failure to broker a meeting would guarantee Sarah's plan would go into action. Delphine sucked at her lips. "They might be willing if you can offer them something in return."

Dr. Bowles inclined her head in permission.

"We—they need an off-site facility, a laboratory, and the resources to conduct research and trials equal to that of the DYAD."

"But with no association to the DYAD?" Dr. Bowles mused.

Delphine nodded.

"I'm willing to discuss it," Dr. Bowles declared. "With them."

Delphine checked a sigh. The role of messenger felt ill cut to her frame. "I will pass on the message."
Her words eked another smile from Dr. Bowles. "Soon?"
"As soon as possible."
"Then I won't detain you. Contact me as soon as you have their answer."

Delphine reached for the door but hesitated. She eyed Dr. Bowles. "You know where they are. Why don't you approach them directly?"

Amusement brightened Dr. Bowles's gaze. "Diplomacy is a delicate tightrope. Trust once broken requires twice the effort to repair. None of us have time for that. Wouldn't you say?"

"I don't know if Sarah will listen," cautioned Delphine.

"Don't mistake a dislike for what they hear for not listening," Dr. Bowles said. "Sarah will listen. Whether or not she'll play along is the real question. Though my advice if you meet resistance would be to appeal to her better nature—by which I mean Cosima."

Delphine considered. "What if Cosima agrees but Sarah refuses?"

"Kindly let Cosima know that's not an option."

"Sarah does not strike me as the type to react well to bullying."

"Who's bullying?" Dr. Bowles asked blithely. "It seems to me this is a negotiation."

Negotiation.

"I want to be present at this meeting," Delphine said.

The amusement traveled into a curl of Dr. Bowles's lip. "Succeed in bringing Sarah around and you're welcome to join us."

The ease with which Dr. Bowles acquiesced made Delphine wonder what harder bargain she could have driven.

Shortly over an hour later, after a few hasty phone call exchanges with Cosima, Delphine resentfully—and hastily—passed Shay's door on the way to Cosima's apartment. Cosima and Sarah didn't bother with greetings.

"What's this 'bout setting up a meeting?" Sarah demanded. "Who wants to talk to us? Cos said she had no idea."

Delphine crossed her arms and nodded. "Cosima doesn't know this person. Her name is Marion Bowles. She described herself to me as a 'consultant' to the DYAD—whatever that means."

Cosima's brow furrowed. "You don't know?"

Delphine shook her head. "She's told me little about herself and has almost no digital footprint."
Delphine took stock. "It's possible Marion Bowles is not her real name, but I have never gotten that impression. She might be in the DYAD's databases, but I doubt my security clearance is high enough to access anything on her."

"Then how do you know her?" puzzled Sarah.
"She introduced herself to me . . . some time ago. I don't remember exactly when, but it was after you joined the DYAD, Cosima."

"Where was this?" Cosima asked, complete confusion spread across her features.

"At the DYAD," Delphine said.

"What?" both women gasped in stereo but in competing accents.

"So she's DYAD," scoffed Sarah.

"I cannot say for sure whether she is or not," Delphine said. "If she is, she gives the impression of having greater status than Aldous. Or she wants me to have that impression. All I know for certain is that she has knowledge and reach within the DYAD."

"What do you mean?" Cosima asked, tone more even-keeled than Sarah's dwindling patience and skyrocketing agitation. "How do you know?"

"I told you that she introduced herself to me—she knew who I was and what I was doing in the DYAD. She knew about you. She clearly knows about Project Leda and seems well versed with the hierarchy and business of the DYAD in general." Delphine glanced at the floor. "Once I . . . asked her to obtain files that Aldous refused to give me. She provided them."

"What files?" Cosima asked.

Delphine faced Cosima warily. "The medical files of all the subjects showing signs of the affliction."

"All the . . ." Cosima managed in a faint echo. Anger rallied against her disbelief. "Were you going to share that with me?"

Delphine swiped at her brow. "I was waiting for a time when I found something useful or when the data would be relevant."

"Which is all the time?" Cosima countered, heated.

Delphine sighed. "I wasn't prepared to tell you where I got them."

"You could have just said Leekie gave them to you," fired back Cosima.

Delphine spread her hands. "Then we would be here and I would be caught in a lie and you would be angry about that."

"Oy!" Sarah interjected sharply. "Can we get back to this woman? What does she want from us? What can she give us?"

Delphine shoved her hair back. "She may be able to provide the resources we need to conduct research outside of the DYAD and thus allow us to work with Professor Duncan."

"If she's not DYAD," Sarah reiterated.

Delphine nodded. "If she's not with the DYAD. That's as much as I got. She said she would be willing to discuss it with you."

"What's she want in return?" Sarah wondered.

"I don't know," admitted Delphine. "I asked but she wouldn't tell me. Her emphasis was on the
opportunity to speak to you."

Sarah exchanged a look of piqued ire with Cosima. "I got no reason to talk to her. Why don't you go and see if you can get her sorted?"

Delphine shook her head. "She specifically named you, Sarah. Cosima is welcome to join you, but . . . you need to be there."

The clones exchanged wary expressions.

"Sounds like an ambush to me," Sarah muttered. "If she's DYAD, I'm screwed."

Cosima turned a troubled face onto Delphine. "Do you think she could really help us?"

Delphine consulted her instincts. "I can't say for certain but my feeling is that . . . yes."

"When's she wanna meet?" Sarah asked, gruff.

"She told me to contact her as soon as I had your answer. I think she's willing to meet as soon as possible. Immediately."

Consternation deepened in the identical women. Looking to one another, Sarah and Cosima conducted silent debate.

Cosima turned to Delphine. "Could you give us a minute? Sarah and I need to talk."

Delphine nodded and ceded the room to them. As she closed the door behind herself, she heard Sarah say lowly, "I don't know, Cos."

"Yeah, but if we can get a lab—"

The door slotted into the frame and the words dimmed into indecipherable murmurs.

*

Delphine lingered in the hall within proximity of Cosima's door, suspended in the torture of not knowing how long her wait would be and that only one floor down Shay was probably going about a lazy Sunday, out of Delphine's reach and oblivious to her presence. Delphine considered her phone.

To Shay [13:00]: Hey.
From Shay [13:00]: Hey. :) 
To Shay [13:00]: What are you up to?
From Shay [13:00]: Shopping.

Oh.

To Shay [13:01]: Out and about? Where?
From Shay [13:01]: Browsing around the mall. Thought I wld get out and not be a homebody all day.
To Shay [13:02]: Would you rather be a homebody? (I assume that means someone who stays at home.)
From Shay [13:03]: lol yeah, it does. Ngl I love the thought of curling up w/a book all day. But it's good to get out too.
From Shay [13:03]: And I can brainstorm present ideas for my sister-in-law. Her bday is coming up.
To Shay [13:04]: Your brother is married? Are both of your brothers married?
From Shay [13:04]: Yeah, he is. I guess I never mentioned it.
From Shay [13:04]: Only my oldest brother is married.
From Shay [13:05]: Tbh, I don't think my sister-in-law likes me that much.
To Shay [13:05]: Really?
From Shay [13:05]: Did ur day get interrupted?

Delphine waited, to see if Shay would follow up on her question about the heretofore unknown sister-in-law, but when no answer arrived, Delphine let it slide. A topic to plumb another time.

To Shay [13:06]: Yes, it was interrupted. I am on a short break.

Delphine wasn't sure how else to harmlessly refer to the forced timeout.

From Shay [13:07]: Aw. Does that mean u won't get to rest this weekend?

Delphine smiled at the screen.

To Shay [13:07]: Not the way I wanted to. But I would say the weekend still had bright spots.
To Shay [13:07]: :)
To Shay [13:08]: Shay?
From Shay [13:08]: R u aware that u r a huge flatterer?
To Shay [13:08]: Do you like it?
To Shay [13:09]: Shay?
From Shay [13:09]: I'm just going to let u know that I said oh my god out loud.
To Shay [13:09]: In a good way or a bad way?
From Shay [13:10]: omg
To Shay [13:10]: Help me understand please.

Cosima's door swung open and Cosima poked her head out looking first one way and then the other to spot Delphine.

"Wasn't sure if you were still here," Cosima said.

Delphine's smile faded. "Where would I have gone?"

Cosima shrugged and eyed the phone in Delphine's hand. "Are you updating Marion Bowles?"

Delphine wanted to raise an eyebrow but she opted to shake her head.

"Come in," Cosima said tersely and ducked back inside.

Alone again, Delphine reviewed her phone.

From Shay [13:10]: I think u understand. The bigger question is if I should encourage this.
To Shay [13:11]: I have to go.
To Shay [13:11]: Miss you.

Delphine slipped her phone into her pocket where it buzzed a second later. Two unhappy faces greeted her inside Cosima's apartment.

"I'm not convinced this isn't a DYAD ambush," Sarah announced, arms crossed, chin raised in defiance.

"She's not convinced," Cosima echoed drolly.
Delphine suppressed a sigh. "Okay. Cosima told me about the way you plan to use Professor Duncan."

Sarah shot Cosima a look that Cosima avoided acknowledging through willful ignorance.

Delphine plowed ahead. "You want to gamble on Rachel Duncan being better than Aldous? Or do you think that she will have greater empathy for you because you share genes? Because the impression I got was that Rachel does not like you, Sarah. Did Cosima tell you that Rachel halted testing of the stem cell line as a retaliation for your actions?"

Sarah's glance in Cosima's direction was just as sharp as her previous one but now tinged with alarm. Stubbornness seized Sarah's mouth. "The stem cell line that originated from my daughter."

"Rachel didn't halt the development of the treatment out of consideration for Kira," Delphine said, voice hard. "The purpose was to hurt you. Look, I understand that you don't trust Aldous. I'm willing to believe that he lies to you because I know he lies to me to keep me ignorant. But at least I know he lies. I approached Marion Bowles because I saw a way to work around Aldous. With Rachel . . . I have only seen her once, but her actions don't inspire much confidence. Will that change if you reunite her with her father? She is still a part of the DYAD. Aldous—he cares in his way. He is seeking a cure."

"Yeah, well, eventually Rachel is going to have to find one, too, if it affects her," Sarah pointed out. "You say Leekie cares about us, but what about this Marion woman? Can you say the same about her?"

Delphine mulled on her bad position. She couldn't vouch for Marion's intentions.

"I don't know what Dr. Bowles wants," Delphine admitted, "but do you think I'm not looking for the best way to proceed?"

Sarah scoffed. "'Cause you want to help."

"Because I'm involved, too," Delphine said, just short of snapping. "Do you think that the DYAD is going to let me walk away? Did Cosima mention that her previous monitor is missing?"

The unflinching set of Sarah's mouth wasn't all that dissimilar to Cosima's brand of obstinate.

"And, yes, I want to help," Delphine said, tired. "The stem cell treatment is a stop-gap measure. If we have an opportunity with Professor Duncan to develop a gene therapy, that could be used for all of you—without Kira. If you think the way to install Professor Duncan into the DYAD is to cause upheaval within the DYAD—fine. But you said that Cosima told you to talk to me to see if there could be another way, which tells me you aren't completely confident in that plan." Delphine paused. "Marion Bowles knew about you, Sarah. She brought up Ethan Duncan and her desire to speak to you before I told her about your request for an independent research facility. I believe that if her intent were to hold you against your will, she would have already moved against you."

Silence circulated between them. Sarah studied the floor. Delphine's phone jumped in her pocket.

Sarah raised her head. "I want a guarantee that I'm walking out of there and that nothing happens to my family while I'm away from them."

"I'll have to ask her." Delphine reached for her phone. "If it's okay?"

Sarah shrugged.
Delphine moved toward the door but paused. "May I step out?"

Sarah smirked.

In the hall, Delphine unlocked her phone and was greeted by a message from Shay.

From Shay [13:11]: Good luck.
From Shay [13:13]: Thinking of u too.

Lacking a direct line to contact Marion Bowles, Delphine engaged in the game of reaching out to Dr. Bowles's people and waited the minute until unknown number animated her phone. Delphine relayed Sarah's demands.

"I guarantee it," Marion Bowles said. "Tell Sarah she will leave unharmed and of her own free will and that I will not approach her family. If everyone is agreed, I'll have a car sent over."

"Now?" Delphine said, unable to hide her surprise.

"Yes," Dr. Bowles said. "Let me know."

With the promise passed on, Sarah and Cosima reached agreement quickly. Some additional phone tag left the three of them waiting in expectation. They stewed in an uncertain twenty minutes when the call arrived from a man bearing instructions to come out front. In the elevator, Cosima frowned in thought.

"Did you give them the address?" Cosima asked.

"No," Delphine said.

Sarah and Cosima exchanged exasperated and tired expressions.

The car—no, a limousine occupied the street. The driver, as usual, disembarked to open the back door and when Delphine realized no one was inside, her mind fully processed Dr. Bowles's words—that a car would be sent over.

Delphine turned to the driver. "Where are we going?"

The question raised alarm in Sarah and Cosima.

"To meet Dr. Bowles," the suited man stated impassively.

"A promise was made," Delphine said.

The man nodded. "I'm aware."

The women glanced at one another. Delphine climbed in first. Cosima followed. Lingering a second on the street, hands stuffed into the pockets of her jacket against the cold, Sarah reluctantly ducked into the vehicle.

It was a considerable drive. A quiet one. None of them felt inclined to talk. Sarah maintained a hawk's steady observation of the view passing through the panes of the windows. The city receded. The landscape opened up and the urban crush loosened its fisted clutch.

The destination lay behind a gate.
"It's a bloody mansion," Sarah muttered as the car coasted down the long drive.

"I think it's safe to lay to rest doubts about money," Cosima chimed in.

Sarah didn't wait for the driver to open the door for them. She climbed out and conducted a survey of the lay of the land. The driver came up beside her.

"Ms. Manning," he said, "I need to hold onto your firearm."

"My what?" Sarah demanded, looking up at him.

"Right pocket, hanging low," the man said. "It will be returned to you at the conclusion of your visit."

Cosima and Delphine, disembarking the limousine, watched the exchange closely. After a moment, Sarah shook her head and reached into her right pocket. Even having heard what to expect, Delphine tensed at the sight of the blunt-nosed sidearm. The handgun exchanged hands. The driver gestured to the front door. Not with the gun.

"Dr. Bowles is expecting you inside," the driver said, escorting them to the door and opening it.

Sarah led the charge and stepped inside with exploratory caution. Peering beyond Sarah, Delphine could see a bright, open, and decidedly empty foyer.

"Hello?" Sarah called out.

Cosima ventured inside with less hesitation but more open curiosity and interest. Delphine, at the back of the trio, glanced into the driver's face to glean his reaction to them. He stared straight ahead, beyond her and into the distance, a sentinel. Delphine wondered what he might have been witness to in the service of Marion Bowles. Drives conducted without questions to a sundry of locations. Dinners and rendezvous staged in restaurants. Guests shuttled to the estate. Firearms confiscated for the safety of his employer.

Delphine nearly collided into Cosima in her daydreaming. Assessing the situation, Delphine found Sarah and Cosima giving each other startled looks.

"Was that—?" Cosima started.

Sarah hurried across the foyer. Cosima paused only to check Delphine's position.

"Hello?" Sarah called out in a gentle voice as she turned the corner. That's when Delphine heard it. A giggle. "Are you hiding?"

Cosima caught up first and whatever her gaze fixated on made her stop. "Sarah . . ."

Delphine joined them as footfalls sounded from the opposite end of the hall.

"Charlotte," Dr. Bowles called out. "Don't be shy, love. Come out. It's Sarah and Cosima."

The little girl stepped out from the room she had ducked into, hands clasped behind her back and an uncertain, shy smile on her face. The brace on her leg drew Delphine's eyes immediately but nothing in the child's body language indicated an effort to diminish it. Delphine didn't have much reference to accurately gauge the girl's age, but she could not have been older than ten.

"It's like looking into my family photo album," Cosima breathed.
Sarah, lowered in a crouch, looked up at Cosima sharply. For Delphine, who had been studying the child in an attempt to comprehend Marion Bowles as a mother, the child's resemblance emerged into noticeable relief.

"That's right," Dr. Bowles said with a smile as she joined the cluster of adults. It was a smile that Delphine had never seen before. Relaxed, at ease.

Horror grew behind Sarah's eyes. Cosima looked not much more certain as to how to feel.

"What do you say, Charlotte?" Dr. Bowles urged.

"Hello," Charlotte chirped. "You're my big sisters."

Sarah swallowed and turned back to Charlotte. "Hello." Sarah spoke slowly, as if her thoughts were preoccupied by a whirlwind, as if she could not believe the words that had just come out of the little mouth. "How old are you?"

"Eight."

"I have a daughter your age."

"Her name is Kira," piped Charlotte. "I'm her cousin."

"Aunt, actually," Dr. Bowles corrected, surprising even Delphine, that the woman she had known to be untouchably distant and secretive was now unhesitatingly, gently correcting familial relationship connections for someone so young. "But we can stick with cousin for now." Dr. Bowles took in the sight of all of them. "Shall we move somewhere we can talk more comfortably?" She smiled and held a hand out to Charlotte. "Come." The little girl reached for Dr. Bowles, her gait hampered by the brace on her leg, and put her hand into Dr. Bowles's without pause. The pair all but traipsed down the hall, presumably leading way.

Sarah, Cosima, and Delphine stared after them.

"Oh my God," breathed Cosima.

It summed up the collective bewilderment.

* Shuffling into the sitting room felt reminiscent of being summoned to the headmistress's office in anticipation of a lecture or a browbeating. Or how Delphine imagined it felt. It was not one of her schoolgirl experiences. She'd learned there was a degree of permissiveness lent to transgressions committed by high performing students. A blind eye was also served by having the favor of teachers as well. Though Delphine could have guaranteed that any school days summons would not have included the sight of suited men standing in doorways and corners keeping watch.

For what?

Sarah, Cosima, and Delphine stood uncertainly in the well appointed space. Dr. Bowles gave Charlotte a hand up into one of the upright chairs, then slipped onto the one adjacent. Sarah sat across from Dr. Bowles on the sofa, Cosima claimed the spot beside her, and Delphine paused. There was a pair of vacant chairs placed farther off, outside the intimate circle circumscribed by the close placement of the occupied chairs around a coffee table. To take one of those would cast her as the audience of the upcoming exchange—probably not inaccurate, but not a position Delphine relished.
Charlotte looked at Delphine and slipped off the chair.

"Sit here, Dr. Cormier," Charlotte said.

Delphine beheld Charlotte with surprise. "You know my name?"

"Mommy said that Sarah, Cosima, and Dr. Cormier would be coming," Charlotte said, abashed into shyness. She glanced at Sarah and Cosima.

Delphine followed her line of sight, then smiled as gently as she could. "You recognize Sarah and Cosima, so I must be Dr. Cormier."

Charlotte nodded, the littlest bob of her head.

Delphine held her hand out to Charlotte. "You can call me Delphine."

Charlotte kept her head bowed but put her hand gravely into Delphine's and shook her hand.

"Enchantée, Charlotte."

Expression solemn, Charlotte said, "C'est un plaisir de vous rencontrer."

Charlotte snuck a glance into Delphine's expression, astonished but pleased, and then broke into a fit of giggles and recovered her hand. With head bowed, Charlotte circled around the chairs and darted behind the grand piano out of sight. Unmindful of the child's antics, Dr. Bowles caught Delphine's eye and gestured to the vacated chair. Delphine lowered herself into the seat, now aware that while it could look as if she, Cosima, and Sarah were arranged in an arc fanned about their hostess, it could also appear as if she and Dr. Bowles sat on one side of the table and the matched women on the other.

Sarah, tracking Charlotte, said, "You're her monitor?"

"I'm her mother," Dr. Bowles said in a tone that Delphine couldn't help but consider maternal. It didn't mesh with the hard, cynical, questioning figure that Delphine had encountered as Dr. Bowles. The dissonance resisted reconciliation. There could be no ignoring from this point forward the knowledge of Marion, mother, beneath any projections of a hard exterior.

"You carried her?" Sarah pressed.

"Adopted," Marion corrected almost kindly.

"Wait, but are you her monitor?" interjected Cosima.

Marion cocked her head. "What do you mean?"

Cosima leaned forward. "I mean, like, Professor Duncan was also Rachel's monitor and was—I presume—expected to provide reports to DYAD regarding . . . anything. Everything. Obviously when Leekie became Rachel's guardian, the monitor aspect of his stewardship was a given, considering Leekie's position."

Marion interlaced her fingers and settled her hands upon her lap. "Do you ask because you're concerned that I'm beholden to the DYAD, as Ethan and Susan Duncan were for the existence of their child?"

Cosima spread her hands. "I'm trying to understand what we're dealing with here. But, yeah, are you?"
"I thought they couldn't make any more of us," Sarah chimed in.

Marion took in the attention of both clones. "The map to your genetic success was lost, but it was seen as a setback. We didn't stop trying—more than four hundred attempts were made. Charlotte's the only survivor."

"And . . . you decided to adopt her?" Cosima asked, strained.

"Charlotte wasn't conceived in an environment such as yourselves," Marion said. She dipped her chin in Cosima's direction. "Well, your case, Cosima. By the time the project had progressed to the point of mass implantation, DYAD was confident in the viability of the embryos. With the attempts that followed the loss of the Duncans and their research, we were forced to act more deliberately. After four hundred attempts, Charlotte came as a surprise. One we hoped for but a surprise nonetheless. She needed a guardian. I stepped forward."

"So you're DYAD," Sarah said, as Cosima asked, "And she's fully self-aware?"

Marion addressed Cosima first. "As you see." Everyone glanced at Charlotte, who seemed wholly uninterested in the conversation, having procured a paper airplane to play with, but still undeniably present in the room with them, unperturbed. "Charlotte is very bright, very inquisitive—I'm sure you would find it familiar. Charlotte has no . . . sister peers, as you do. While we can compare her development to yours, addressing questions of nurture are not as accessible. In which case I see no reason not to answer her questions." Turning to meet Sarah's eyes, Marion continued, "As for my affiliation with DYAD, it's more accurate to say that I and others oversee their work—steer them, that is—along with many other multi-nationals. We're known as Topside."

Cosima reached up to massage her temples. "There's a group behind DYAD?"

"A cabal, sounds like," Sarah muttered.

Marion nodded. "Yes. You could say that."

Cosima raised a hand, "Okay, that sounds even more whacko conspiracy theory-ish than I thought this could get, but whatever, that's our life now. Can you help us?"

"I believe we can help each other," Marion said.

"You know what we need," Cosima said. "A secure laboratory, one outside the purview of DYAD, the resources to research and synthesize any potential cure, and protection, possibly, for Professor Duncan."

"I want DYAD—the Neolutionists, whoever—off my back," Sarah announced. Cosima glanced at her counterpart in surprise. "If you steer DYAD, like you say, I want them to leave me and my family alone."

Considering Sarah's words, Cosima ventured, "And Professor Duncan gets to keep his research."

Marion listened. Her brow contracted. "Neolutionists?"

"Leekie," spat Sarah, "his group, the ones who brought down the Duncans, whatever groupies he's got planted in DYAD coming after me, Rachel for all I know."

"I see," Marion said quietly. "I assume you haven't approached Rachel with the news of Professor Duncan?"
Sarah's features settled into the hardness of a brick wall, but after a moment she said, "Not yet."

Marion nodded. Then she smiled. "What do I get in this arrangement?"

"What do you want?" Sarah asked warily.

"To begin with, information," Marion said. "Sarah, I believe that your mother, Siobhan, can verify a matter I've been looking into."

Sarah frowned. "What matter?"

"There are other forces at work beyond Topside. Agendas that could present a danger to us. To you and your sisters." Marion looked from Sarah to Cosima. "Does Castor mean anything to either of you?"

Sarah shook her head.

Cosima shrugged. "In mythology, Castor and Pollux are the Gemini twins. They're the sons of . . . Leda."

Marion nodded. "Correct."

"What's this have to do with anything?" Sarah asked, looking between Cosima and Marion. "Besides the fact that we're Leda."

"I'd rather not say until I have confirmation," Marion said.

"Alright," Sarah said slowly, "but that's something you have to take up with my mum. I can't guarantee she'll help you—unless, maybe, you promise to keep DYAD away from us."

"I can't," Marion said carefully, "but I can lend you the extent of my influence. Just as I can't," Marion said, looking to Cosima, "promise that Ethan Duncan's research will remain solely his property. It's not how science works or advances, as you know. If not Ethan Duncan today, it'll be someone else tomorrow. We at Topside secure monopolies on a future that embraces genetic engineering, synthetic biology—a future I believe is, without a doubt, inevitable. I think you know that very well, Cosima."

Cosima's jaw set in a bullish line.

Sarah scoffed. "And if you don't profit, someone else will."

"Yes," Marion answered, as if the answer were self-evident, the unflappable Dr. Bowles emerging. "But if the knowledge resides in our hands, we set the agenda with the leverage to guide the pace and direction of human progress. We are sprinting toward the future, but at times our reach outpaces the social climate. When society is ready, we'll already have developed the techniques to make the transition seamless."

"So everyone can have clone babies," Sarah sneered.

"If they want to," Marion countered, "yes, with the expectation that the procedure can be done safely and professionally and in a sociopolitical environment that promotes normalization and provides protections."

The distaste lay open on Sarah's face but Delphine suspected Marion's pitch was more for Cosima's ears. Yet Cosima looked torn.
"So we're the interim step," Cosima said, "the guinea pigs, the ones who get sick so you can correct the problem in the next iteration. The next model."

"As it turned out," Marion said with gentleness, "yes." She glanced at Charlotte.

Cosima tracked Marion's gaze. "If we can develop a cure with Professor Duncan, can't we agree to let him keep the sequences to himself and you can have the cure for Charlotte?"

A smile took leisurely possession of Marion's lips. "Putting aside that I would be facilitating the creation of such a cure, would you really withhold it from a child?" Marion glanced not at Cosima but at Sarah, who avoided her eyes. "I'm invested and it's for that reason that I'm pursuing a line of inquiry that could put me at grave personal risk."

Was that the reason for all the security? Delphine wondered. Or was this simply how Marion lived?

"What if S can't help you?" Sarah wondered. "Does that mean you won't help Cos?"

Marion studied Cosima. "I believe Cosima and I understand the terms. It may be that I have as much stake in your success as you do. It's possible to situate you here, in a wing of the house, lodgings provided for Professor Duncan and yourself, if you like. It would eliminate a commute and security, as you can see, is already in place."

Sarah and Cosima exchanged stunned looks.

"I'd . . . need to think about that," Cosima said.

"And we need to talk to S and Duncan," Sarah concluded. "How do we get in touch with you?"

"Charlotte," Marion called. Charlotte dipped the plane into a descent and pulled up abruptly by her mother's side. "Darling, can you go to my purse and bring the case with my cards?"

Charlotte beamed and hurried off.

Cosima voiced the remark on their minds. "She's not like Rachel."

Marion eyed Cosima and Sarah both. "No, she's not."

They adjourned to the foyer while Charlotte attended to her assignment.

"We'll talk to our people and get back to you," Sarah said into the silence, partly, Delphine suspected, to break it or to disturb the vast space.

Having conducted a cursory study of the decor, particularly the skylight from which descended the chandelier, Cosima said, "It's Dr. Bowles, right?"

Marion looked mildly surprised, "We haven't conducted formal introductions. Apologies. Yes, it's Dr. Bowles."

"Not like you needed an introduction to us," Cosima muttered. Murmurs wafted from the hall. Cosima swept her gaze around the high ceilings, the opulent pieces. "How did you get . . . here? How did you wind up in Topside?"

"A long story," Marion intoned. "Perhaps you and I can discuss it some time, should you and I discover an opportunity."
Sarah glanced between the two of them.

Charlotte toddled into the foyer and slipped behind her mother, hiding behind her mother’s form but also holding out to Marion a slim golden-colored case.

"Thank you, love," Marion said, smoothing down Charlotte’s hair. Marion extracted business cards and held them out, fanned between her fingers. There were three.

Sarah snatched one first, Cosima second, and then, because there were three, Delphine took one for herself.

Sarah, looking at the card, snickered. Cosima said, "Wow."

The card was a thick, heavy stock, and the only information printed on it was a phone number.

"You give these out regularly?" Sarah wondered, flipping the card over to the blank back.

"No," Marion said simply. "I’ll be waiting for your call."

Sarah nodded and slipped the card into her back pocket.

Marion gestured to the front door. "The car is ready."

"Will you come back?" Charlotte asked, her cheek pressed into Marion’s side.

"We’ll see, darling," Marion answered for Sarah and Cosima.

"It was nice to meet you, Charlotte," Cosima told her, holding out a hand.

Marion gently prodded Charlotte forward. Charlotte slunk out from behind her mother and stood before Cosima. She considered Cosima’s hand before putting hers into the one that bore numerous rings. Charlotte looked to Sarah.

Sarah looked pained but she crouched down and held out her hand. Charlotte smiled as she shook Sarah’s hand.

"It was nice to meet you, Charlotte," Sarah said, echoing Cosima, but her voice soft and gentle.

"Maybe next time I can meet Kira?" Charlotte asked.

Sarah didn’t frown, which Delphine considered admirable. "I can’t say." Sarah glanced at Marion. "I think that depends on your mum."

Marion inclined her head in acknowledgment. With the farewells complete, Charlotte withdrew back to Marion’s side.

Cosima opened the front door, being the closest to it, and stepped out. Sarah followed at her heels. Delphine moved slower.

"I have a question," ventured Delphine softly.

Marion raised an eyebrow. "You were quiet back there."

Delphine ignored the remark. "All this security—what is it for?"

Marion’s mouth twisted tight—with amusement. "There are . . . dangers in this line of the work."
"Is it just you and Charlotte here? Is all of this for the two of you?"

Marion smiled, an expression drawn inward. "The decisions we make come with consequences. And, often, sacrifices. We . . . let go of some things in order to gain others. And what we gain we need to protect." Marion squeezed Charlotte's shoulder and held her close.

Delphine thought about Charlotte's final question to her "big sisters." "It seems lonely."

"Pioneering often is."

Charlotte strained her head back to look up at her mother, a question in her eyes. Marion absently smoothed the crown of Charlotte's head, recognizing Charlotte's interest, but remained focused on Delphine. The display more than anything else ushered Delphine out the door. Dr. Bowles Delphine might have grown bolder to confront, but Marion was too new a revelation to provide Delphine a sense of footing.

Lessons imparted by Dr. Bowles were not so difficult to parse, but what might Marion want Delphine to take away?

On the step a glissando of mingled laughter drew Delphine's gaze back. She caught sight only of the door closing shut, invaders precluded, occupants sealed in—mother and daughter, scientist and project, and the suited men tasked to preserve their persons.
Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Sarah, Cosima, and Delphine were silent on the return drive, regardless of the privacy window partitioning their compartment from the driver's cabin. Cosima fiddled with her phone. To watch her stirred a faint sense of queasiness in Delphine's stomach. Sarah sat with arms tightly crossed and stewed at everything and everyone. Delphine spent much of the drive discreetly studying Sarah, the curl and wave of her hair, the scowl of her lips, the application of her makeup that lent her features an edge, the rebelliousness that emanated even from the choice of leather jacket and boots.

Jennifer and Cosima and Sarah.

Women who were worlds apart.

Logic held that Cosima and Sarah could have been any pair of naturally occurring twins, as different and similar as such siblings could develop and become in any conventional family arrangement, in one household or separated, but Delphine's knowledge of their nature precluded such humdrum rationalizations. Sarah and Cosima were different because of course they would be different—the nature of the experiment had been designed to test and encourage differences.

Their differences legitimized the hypothesis.

Proof of concept.

Upon arriving at Cosima's apartment building, the window between the compartments retracted. The driver twisted in the seat and reached through the gap. In his hand was the gun.

"Ma'am," he said, meeting Sarah's eyes.

When everyone was sure that he was simply returning the firearm, the gun went back in Sarah's pocket. The driver opened the door for them to disembark and, once divested of them, the limousine went on its way.

The three of them milled about uncertainly. Sarah looked to Cosima, "You comin' with me?"

"I think so. Yeah." Cosima glanced at Delphine. "I'll see you tomorrow."

Sarah eyed Delphine. "You didn't say much back there."

"It did not feel like my place to speak," Delphine said.

"Yeah?" Sarah asked. "What were you and Marion Bowles talking about before you came out?"

"The security," Delphine said, seeing no reason to lie. "It was very high."

Sarah smirked. "You surprised? A woman like that has got to have a lot of enemies."

"That's what I was thinking," Delphine agreed. She glanced at Sarah's pocket. "How did you get that?"

"Why? You want one?"
Delphine's lack of immediate reply drew down Cosima's brow in consternation. "Delphine?"

Delphine held Sarah's eyes for a second. Sarah squinted at her, unsure. "I'm curious. I didn't think Canada was like the United States, where it seems like everyone can buy and carry a gun."

"It's not," said Sarah shortly.

Delphine's brow furrowed. "You cannot buy guns in Canada?"

"You can," Sarah said. "You need to get a license and all that."

Delphine hesitated, drew a breath.

"No," Sarah answered before Delphine could present her question, "I don't have one."

Delphine nodded slowly. "Then there are ways around that?"

Sarah sized up Delphine. "You interested?"

Delphine deigned not to answer. Turning to Cosima, who was watching her and Sarah with a low level of alarm, Delphine forced a smile. "I'll see you tomorrow. Try to rest. You are still recovering."

"Okay," Cosima said warily, eyes skeptical. "Until tomorrow."

With considering eyes and a little lift of her chin Sarah bid Delphine farewell. She led Cosima to the truck parked down the street. Delphine watched them and waited until they were gone to take out her phone.

No new messages.

Delphine stared at her exchanges with Shay, debating.

Shay wasn't expecting her. Space could . . . be a good thing. And maybe—maybe there had been some truth to Shay's words. Maybe this was . . . stress. A response to stress. A response to stress that Delphine had never before experienced. So perhaps she needed time to assess it by doing what she usually did in the face of stress. Which was to take as many matters into her own hands as she could.

Which, really, meant that she should go see Shay, because that was a matter she could take into her own hands.

Delphine caved.

To Shay [17:13]: Shay? Are you home?
From Shay [17:14]: Hey. Yeah. All done shopping.
To Shay [17:14]: May I come in?
From Shay [17:15]: R u here? Come in.

Delphine exhaled in a gust that sent her breath fleeing in a puff of cloud.

Shay opened the door with a bright "Hey!" and a wide smile that faded in enthusiasm when she took in the sight of Delphine. Which felt a bit unfair, since Delphine was smiling. To some degree. She felt the strain around her mouth.

"Hello," Delphine said softly.

Shay scanned Delphine's face. "Everything okay?"
Delphine nodded. "Yeah."

"Okay," intoned Shay measuredly, reaching for Delphine's hand. Shay pulled Delphine inside with a gentle tug, her eyes scanning Delphine's face. "C'mere."

Shay stepped close and slipped her arms around Delphine's waist. The unexpected hug and Delphine's momentarily paralyzing surprise forced Shay to turn her head and rest her cheek on Delphine's shoulder. The warmth of Shay pressed close jumpstarted Delphine's arms into motion, cinching around Shay to hold her close. Shay rubbed circles across Delphine's back. "Bad day?"

Delphine didn't respond for a time. "Shay?"

"Yeah?"

"May I kiss you when I see you?"

Shay exhaled in a little laugh. "Don't you usually?"

"You know what I mean."

"Do you want to?"

"I don't know if I should," Delphine said, aware Shay would interpret the phrasing as a request for permission, but knowing she meant it as whether or not it was a wise course of action.

Shay pulled back and brushed the back of her fingers across Delphine's cheek, then cupped it and drew Delphine down. Their lips met with the tentativeness of expedition, gentle with caution and question, brief and almost shy. Delphine withdrew with a small smile. Shay sucked at her lips, thoughtful, hand dropping to rest on Delphine's shoulder.

Delphine surveyed her reaction. "You can tell me if you don't like kissing me."

Shay was quiet.

Delphine raised an eyebrow. "I don't say that to tease you. I mean it."

"I'm not very good at this," Shay said quietly.

"At kissing?" Delphine wondered, incredulous and lost and thankful for the only time that day to be feeling so.

"No—well—I guess maybe I don't know that . . . for sure." Shay's brow dimpled with doubt. "I assume I'm not terrible. No one's told me otherwise. But I guess that's not something you generally tell someone, even if it's true. Unless you have a really bad fight?"

Delphine, tracking the line of thought through Shay's furrowing brow, queried with a burgeoning smile, "Am I bad at kissing?"

"No," Shay said carefully.

"Diplomatic answer," observed Delphine, relaxing into the moment.

"What do you mean?"

Delphine shrugged. "I would say you currently have little empirical evidence on which to judge."
Shay answered with an unimpressed glare flat with exasperation.

Delphine smiled. "What did you mean? What aren't you good at?"

Shay's eyes flitted over Delphine's face, features settling into somber lines. "Believing this is happening."

"You mean believing that I want to kiss you?"

"Yeah," exhaled Shay.

"The real question is do you want me to want to kiss you?"

In barely more than a whisper, Shay said, "It's a scary thing to want."

Disappointment seared across Delphine's ribs but it felt hypocritical when uncertainties camped in the forefront and recesses of her mind. She focused on Shay's words. "But you want it?"

"Delphine," Shay said with an attempt at a little smile, "it's been two days."

"Has it?" questioned Delphine. "Yesterday you said—you said I went from zero to one hundred. At the time it felt like an apt description. But I'm not sure it is. You've been important to me for a long time now. This process is more like . . . titration."

"That sounds vaguely familiar but I'm not sure what that means," Shay said.

"Titration is a method in chemistry by which you determine—you measure—the unknown amount of a reactant by adding another. The process is precise enough that one drop can be the difference between the exact amount of reactant needed to provide a true measurement and too much. You can see it. Initially adding a reactant produces no changes. But suddenly, with one drop, there's a streak of color—and you know. Friday morning was like that for me. The . . . the feelings—the degree of what I felt—all of that was already there, looking unremarkable, but just one moment, one thought and . . . I could see it."

As Delphine spoke, Shay broke into a smile that sat upon her silent lips when Delphine finished.

"Too much science?" Delphine asked.

Shay's smile deepened at the corners. "Somehow you still surprise me."

"Is that good? Am I winning?"

"Winning?" Shay repeated. "Now I know I'm in trouble if you're turning this into a competition."

"I meant winning you over to my point of view," Delphine clarified.

Shay smile acquired a sardonic edge. "That sounds like a form of competition to me."

"As long as I win, I'll be happy to have you call it whatever you want."

"Wow," Shay intoned, eyes widening, leaning back in Delphine's hold. "Yeah. Still surprising me."

Delphine grinned. "It's worth it to see you enjoy it."

Shay ducked her head, abashed, and shook it in amazement. An impulse dared Delphine to drop a kiss upon Shay's head. Delphine didn't heed it. Not yet.
Raising her gaze, Shay asked, "Have you eaten?"

"I . . ." began Delphine hesitantly, "may have missed lunch."

Concern flooded Shay's features. "You must be starving. Okay, first order of business is food."

Delphine was not, in fact, starving. No appetite at all clamored for attention and satisfaction.

"What's that expression on your face?" Shay asked.

Delphine quirked a brow. "I was thinking it is early enough that you could come over and I could make the dinner I intended to cook yesterday."

Shay laughed. "You are not going to let this go, are you?"

"No," confirmed Delphine. "I have been trying for some time to have you come over."

Shay shook her head. "How do I know that your romantic overtures aren't just a creative excuse to get me to come over?"

"You don't," Delphine declared, "until you come over and find out."

Shay bowed her head again, then nudged the crown of her head into Delphine's sternum for greater admonishing effect. With a sigh, Shay looked up at Delphine. "It's going to happen—"

"It could happen very soon, within the hour," Delphine pointed out.

"—I promise," Shay finished with emphasis, "but for now let's not trouble ourselves too much."

Delphine sighed. "Fine. Is this a zen attitude? To let go of desires and not satisfy them immediately?"

"Keep talking like that, smarty, and you'll be eating alone," teased Shay.

"I could kidnap you," Delphine suggested cheerfully.

"I guess that means I'm driving," Shay said. "Once you let me go."

"Do I have to?"

"Yes, or we can't go anywhere."

"But letting you go feels like a gamble," Delphine said. "Like I might not get to hold you again."

Shay laughed. "You are . . . you are something else, Delphine Cormier."

"Is it working?" Delphine asked with a smile.

"You know what would work?" Shay asked. "If you came with me to dinner."

Delphine relented. "Okay, okay. But I want to state that I do not mind cooking and that the food is already there, waiting. And," Delphine declared, "you will be able to leave of your own free will."

Shay laughed, eyebrows rising. "Was that something I had to worry about? I didn't know that was something I might not be able to do."

"I am trying to allay all possible fears," Delphine said.
Shay smiled in a way that clearly said she wanted to shake her head again. "Can we go?"

"Okay."

Delphine kept looking at Shay. Steadily. With a soft smile. As soft as the light of the candle on the table at the Italian restaurant, the one they'd first dined at months ago that served delicious cannolis, the one Shay had forgotten existed and to which she and Delphine had not returned since.

Warmth crept into Shay's cheeks.

"I would tell you to stop," Shay said quietly to her plate of linguine, aiming to pitch her tone light, "but I think that would encourage you to be more obnoxious."

"Stop what?" Delphine asked, eyes sparkling. "What is obnoxious?"

The heat in Shay's cheeks could have warmed a tepid cup of tea. "Nothing."

Delphine smiled. "Nothing? Tell me."

Shay paused, then said, "The way you're looking at me."

Delphine glanced down at her plate to spear bowtie pasta. "You would rather I not look at you?"

Shay took a deep breath. "I'm not used to you looking at me like that."

"Like what?" Delphine asked.

Shay bit her lower lip. Shaking her head, she said, "Do you want me to take out my compact so you can see?"

"It might help," Delphine agreed lightly, the gleam in her eyes banked but not extinguished. "I was told before that I should consult a mirror."

Shay's brow furrowed. "Who told you that?"

Delphine mulled through a mouthful of bowties. "Cosima."

"Cosima? What were you talking about?"

"We were discussing attraction and sexual orientation," Delphine said.

"Yours?" Shay asked, stunned.

"No," Delphine said quickly. "I was asking her about her own experience."

Surprise trickled through Shay's synapses until comprehension sparked across the connections. "So you know she's gay." The words tugged at a contingent realization that slackened Shay's muscles, dropping her hand to the tablecloth and resting her fork upon the plate. "Oh my God, of course you know, you asked if Cosima—you thought that she and I—"

They stared at one another.

Delphine sat in an air of bewilderment and confusion. "Have we not discussed this?"

Shay covered her mouth behind the tent of her hands. "No, because I didn't want to out Cosima to
They sat silent, an air of astonishment settling between them. At last, Delphine said, "I have known since Cosima was hired."

Shay covered her eyes. "Oh my God. This whole time."

Delphine fell into deep thought, her gaze no longer that soft consideration, but intense inward reflection. What emerged from her mouth was a soft sound like "huh." After a time during which neither spoke, digesting the revelation, Delphine chuckled. She tucked her hair behind her ear and said, "Okay. Well. Cosima is very open about it."

"Yeah," Shay agreed measuredly, "she has been, with me. But I wasn't sure—"

"If Cosima and I have civil conversation?" Delphine finished.

"Obviously you have conversation if you work with each other," Shay said, "but with the way you two are, I didn't really imagine that would extend to the . . . personal."

"Honestly," Delphine said, "I'm never sure where my conversations with Cosima will go."

Shay expected Delphine's words to hold a joke, but the tone was frank and her gaze clear.

"Is that how you landed on the topic of her sexuality?" Shay wondered. "Unexpectedly?"

"No," Delphine said slowly, "it wasn't unexpected. I asked her."

Shay felt the smile overtaking her lips.

"I couldn't ask you," Delphine said. "And, anyway, now I'm not allowed to look at you—"

"I didn't say that," Shay scolded lightly. "What I meant was—"

Embarrassment and consternation cut off Shay. She glanced off to the side to wrestle with the tide, with this, sitting to dinner with Delphine—on a date. Wherein Delphine was looking at her very softly, with affection, in a way that Shay had actually never imagined, had never permitted herself to imagine, and why did this agony of uncertainty in the face of Delphine's single-minded, full throttle crusade feel like karma?

Delphine's voice, soft and concerned, reclaimed Shay's attention. "Do you not want me to be obvious . . . in public? Does that make you nervous?"

"No," Shay said quickly, because horror was her first response, "no, no, no. That's not—" Shay studied Delphine, the beautiful woman watching Shay with the utmost earnestness for Shay's comfort and feelings. The woman who'd once declared without hesitation that Shay was trying too hard to find romance and another time determined that Shay wasn't being discerning enough in evaluating possibilities, whose consideration in the present threatened an ache in Shay's heart. Shay smiled, feeling the effort of it in counter to the weights grounding the balloon of emotions. "You're incredible. You're not bothered at all by how you feel or what anyone thinks or—any of it, are you?"

Delphine didn't respond immediately. Her eyes analyzed Shay's expression with laser focus. "You have given me a very specific goal to focus on: showing you I do feel what I feel."

Shay shook her head. She held onto her smile as the muscles relaxed around her mouth. "That's not it. I don't think that has anything to do with it. This is just—it's you."
"I don't know how else to be," Delphine said carefully, as if she were presenting an answer to a poorly worded question on an exam.

"I know," Shay breathed, warmth in her voice. "I'm not teasing you. I'm—I'm in awe. And maybe a little jealous." Shay wet her lips. "It's how it should be. I wouldn't want it any other way for you. For anyone."

Comfort didn't calm the consideration of Delphine's gaze. "It wasn't like that for you?"

Shay lowered her gaze and chuckled. Maybe a little darkly. Just a smidgen. "No, I was—I guess I didn't make it easy. For myself. I was—a mess about it. And going about sorting it out."

Sorrow touched Delphine's features. She reached over and, with the slightest of pauses before making contact, covered Shay's hand. "I'm sorry."

"Don't be," Shay assured her. "It's done and over with."

Delphine's thumb stroked across Shay's hand in a manner undeniably distracting. Delphine, expression drifting to far off locales of rumination, didn't seem to notice her effect.

Shay sat in their silence for a time, tracking the path of Delphine's thumb across her skin, but rallied to ask, "What are you thinking?"

Delphine blinked, rejoining Shay. The tug at the corner of Delphine's mouth was vexed. "I wish it had not been hard for you."

Shay shrugged. It might have even projected nonchalance. "I'm not sure I'd be who I am if it hadn't taken time for me to work it out. I'm not sure I'd be here, in Toronto. Who knows where I'd be?"

Delphine eyed her speculatively. "Barcelona?"

Shay laughed. "No, I don't think so. Not if figuring out that stuff had been easy."

Delphine hummed. "May I now ask about Barcelona?"

Shay glanced away. "I don't want to ruin the mood."

Looking back revealed confusion in Delphine's eyes. But she said, "May I ask about your brother, then? You said he was married."

"Yeah, my older brother—the older of my two brothers. They've been married... four years now?"

Delphine smiled, laughter in her eyes. "I don't know his name."

Shay opened her mouth soundlessly, then pressed her lips against a laugh. When the giggles were contained, Shay said, "It's Chris. Christopher. I just realized I always refer to my brothers as just 'my brothers."

"Yes, you do," Delphine confirmed, smile lengthening. "And the name of your other brother?"

"Paul. And Nadia is Chris's wife."

"And her birthday is coming up."

Shay nodded. "Yeah. I really... don't know what to get her. I think maybe I'll get them a subscription for snacks?"
Delphine raised an eyebrow in complete bafflement.

Shay waved a hand. "There are these services that will send you regular packages of—whatever. From this company it's healthy snacks. You get a package like every two weeks or every month for a flat fee. Different ones each time. A friend was telling me about how you can order ones for all sorts of things like coffee, tea, chocolate, candy, stuff like that."

"Will they like that?" Delphine asked with caution.

"I have no idea," confessed Shay. Thinking aloud, Shay ventured, "Although, I could get them something like a Chef's Table subscription. Chris does most of the cooking, but Nadia might appreciate a changeup in meals, or that she won't have to go grocery shopping when it's her turn. I don't know, I'll have to think about it some more."

Delphine smiled. "Do you usually buy gifts for someone's birthday?"

"No," Shay corrected sternly. "I try to. I don't always remember, though. Or I don't always find something in time. Then it's too late and you might as well think about it the next year's birthday."

"When is your birthday?" Delphine asked.

Shay should have seen that coming. She focused on twining strands of pasta around her fork into a tight ball. "Now we're getting really personal."

"Mine is the twenty-first of December," Delphine volunteered readily.

"That's coming up," Shay observed. "And it's close to Christmas. When you were growing up, did your parents combine your birthday and Christmas in terms of getting presents?"

Without answering, Delphine sat looking at Shay expectantly.

Shay loosed a dramatic sigh. "July nineteenth."

"July?" echoed Delphine, scandalized. "We knew each other then. You didn't say anything."

Shay shrugged. "I didn't think it was a big deal. And we didn't know each other well at that point." Teasing, she demanded, "What would you have done?"

"Dinner, a drink, cake, one of those at least," Delphine fired off, almost distracted.

Shay chuckled. "Okay. Next time you can do one of those."

"Is that all the expectations you have of me?" Delphine wondered. "Just one of those?"

"Well," Shay drawled, "you said 'at least.'"

"That's right," Delphine muttered, like a warning.

"I feel the need to point out that you're the one raising the bar," Shay said.

"You only need to point it out if you doubt my intentions to deliver," Delphine countered.

Shay raised her free hand in surrender. "Just saying."

Delphine smiled and removed her hand from atop Shay's to take a sip of water. When she put the
glass down, she said, more softly, "In your message you said that you don't think that your sister-in-law likes you."

Shay braced for the question.

Delphine established cautious eye contact. "Why did you mention it?"

That was not the question Shay expected. "Why did I mention it?"

Delphine nodded as if Shay had been merely restating Delphine's questions instead of requesting clarification.

"That's . . . your question?" Shay asked.

Delphine nodded. "Yes."

"Are you—" Shay paused. "You want to know why I mentioned it?"

Delphine's eyebrows leapt up. "Yes. Was my English unclear? You are always telling me it is so good."

"It is good," Shay said. "It's excellent. I just—"

"It's not what you wanted me to ask?" Delphine inquired.

"It's not what I expected you to ask," Shay admitted.

"What did you expect?"

"That you would ask me why my sister-in-law doesn't like me."

Delphine nodded. "That is a curious state of affairs, yes, but I would not know she feels that way if you had not mentioned it. So . . . I think you wanted me to know that. And I'm curious as to why."

Delphine looked right through Shay.

Shay hung her head, smiling to herself in disbelief. "Yeah." She raised her head. "I did."

Delphine prompted her with an upward flick of an eyebrow.

Shay tapped the end of her fork against the plate. "My brothers are . . . important people to me. I wanted you to know that. And that they come with their own stories, too."

Delphine nodded in consideration. "It's not a test?"

"Whoa," Shay said, raising one hand, palm out. "Okay." She finagled through the logic to possible sources of Delphine's question. "Okay, I can kind of see where that's coming from. Yeah, I guess relationships can be full of little tests, in the sense that you're always learning—or confirming—how someone reacts to a situation, but . . . this . . . that isn't one."

Delphine nodded again in that measured way. "Is it a warning?"

"It . . . might have been something like that," Shay confessed.

That nod. "What happened between you and your sister-in-law?"

Shay shook her head. "Nothing happened, per se. Just that . . . she and my brother have been
together for a long time. Like . . . going back to around the time I got out—of the military. I don't know if I've conveyed this clearly, but I wasn't in the best state of mind, and I don't think I made a great first impression on her. I probably—no, not probably, I did cause Chris to worry a lot. And I don't think Nadia . . . has ever forgotten or trusted me since.”

Delphine's mouth dipped in contemplation. "Do you think that's fair?"

Shay shrugged. "I don't blame her. I mean, Nadia's a great person. She has a really good head on her shoulders and she keeps my brother grounded and I'm so glad he found her. But it can be . . . a little tense between us. She knows Chris is stuck with me—and that he's going to stick with me—and so she . . . tolerates me."

"Hm," Delphine hummed. "What did you do that made your brother worry?"

Shay released a thin exhalation. This was it. The warning. "It was a bunch of things, probably, but the biggest was—I disappeared for a time. Like I didn't tell anyone where I was going or where I was and no one could get in contact with me. I just did it. I just went. It was Chris and my mom who realized no one knew where I was. They were . . . pretty angry at me when I came back. It didn't help that I was—I left lost and I got lost and came back still lost."

Delphine's eyes narrowed with consideration. "Are you trying to warn me that you might embark on a journey without notice at any moment?"

"I . . . might be," Shay conceded. She wanted to say more, that it wasn't the prospect of a physical disappearance that loomed, but the possible onset of the one in her head, the emptiness that pushed her to drift and fade and run. That she didn't know how to protect anyone from that—from herself. But it wasn't easy—it had never been easy—Shay never knew how to tell someone that before it was too late, before it was happening, before she was already lost and the other person lost to her.

"I feel, though," Delphine said with intent gravity, "that hearing this history means that you understand that . . . disappearing . . . is not something you should do."

Shay inhaled to steady her nerves and nodded. "That's . . . true."

"Disappearing of your own free will, of course," Delphine said. "If someone is making you disappear, I understand that you may not have much control in that situation."

The laugh ambushed Shay.

"I do not relish the prospect of either scenario," declared Delphine.

Relaxed by Delphine's playfulness, Shay said, "The point is . . . sometimes I'm not a very good little sister, or even capable of being a considerate or—decent”—functioning—"person—and that's . . . that's something you should know."

"So, in other words, you are . . . human," Delphine said. She torqued her hand back and forth in the air. "Average, even, in the sense that you experience and exhibit behaviors most people do."

Shay rolled her eyes. "Yes."

"Oh, good," Delphine said brightly. "I'm glad we cleared that up and that after all this time I am . . . up to speed?" Delphine smiled. "I'm afraid you'll have to discover my flaws." Delphine delayed a beat. "Because I don't know them."

Oh my God.
The laughter that overtook Shay tipped her head back. The last of it fluttered out of her on a sigh as she lowered her head, shaking it, and brought herself under control.

But she was smiling.

Shay was doing a lot of that.

Across the table Delphine smiled at her, eyes throwing back the softness of the candlelight.

As they approached Shay's apartment, Delphine slowed, extending Shay's arm, attached to the hand clasped within Delphine's, and brought them to a halt just shy of attaining the door. It had been a little gesture, Delphine taking Shay's hand as they walked away from the car, though it could barely be considered a walk from the parking spot Shay had found to her first floor apartment.

"I need advice," Delphine said, drawing Shay around to face her, "from my very good friend."

Shay cocked her head. "Yeah? Would that be me?"

"Mm," Delphine intoned low in her throat, "yes. You see, I'm not sure what to do."

"About what?" Shay asked.

"This woman," Delphine said. She studied the light fixture mounted on the corridor wall. "I met her . . . some time ago. We spend time together. It started . . . like once a week. I didn't know what to expect. But . . . she . . . makes me smile. And laugh. When I need to talk, she listens. She has become . . . a really good friend."

Delphine nodded consideringly. "I think I really like her."

Delphine met Shay's flat gaze with a little smile. "As more than a friend. I don't know how to let her know. Or what I should do."

"Well," drawled Shay, "that can be a tough situation. How close are you two?"

"I think—I would like to think that we have grown very close. From my perspective we are close. I . . . I trust her."

Shay nodded and surveyed the buttons of Delphine's coat. "Sometimes being really close can make it harder."

Delphine affected a frown. "I've never been with another woman before, so maybe . . . maybe that will make it hard for her. To . . . to believe me."

"It can, um—" Shay nodded. "—it can make someone nervous to be someone else's first."

"But romantic relationships are romantic relationships, whatever the arrangement, aren't they?"

Shay smiled and raised her eyes. "I think that really depends on the parties involved. How's your experience with romantic relationships? Have you liked them? Did they go well?"

"Well," Delphine said with an uncertain pull at the corners of her mouth, "I am single."

Shay giggled. "Is she single?"

"Yes," Delphine said, "as far as I know. And I think she dates women."

"That's really helpful," Shay said. "That—that increases your chances. I mean, look at you, you turn
heads."

Delphine frowned. "Is that the most important part?"

Shay laughed. "It helps."

"I'm not sure she's so shallow," Delphine said, eyes agleam.

"You sure you're not giving her too much credit?" Shay wheedled. "Well, if she wants more than that, it's a good thing that your presence is so enjoyable."

"You think so?" Delphine asked, perking up in the fiction.

"Yeah. I do. Your edges are a little sharp sometimes, but that's because you're so intelligent—and you're never sorry about it."

"Sharp? I don't want to hurt her. I want . . . I want her to be happy."

They studied one another.

"What should I do?" Delphine asked.

Shay grinned because she felt like she'd walked into her next words. "You could try inviting her over for dinner so you could talk in private."

"I have tried," Delphine confessed in a hush. "I keep trying. You see, my schedule has gotten so unpredictable and demanding that I try at every moment I have free time."

"That's tough," Shay consoled her. "Maybe you'll have better luck another time."

"When, do you think?" Delphine asked.

"Maybe tomorrow," Shay suggested.

"That would be very lucky," Delphine assessed. "I have supplies ready to host dinner."

Shay considered Delphine somberly. "What if you had to wait for her to come around? For her to . . . see you in the same light? Would it be worth it?"

Delphine's lips crooked in the slightest curve. "I think so."

Shay took a breath. "At what point would it no longer be worth it to wait?"

Delphine's brow furrowed for a second. "I don't know. I think she has been very patient with me."

"She has?" Shay asked, giving full voice to her surprise.

"Very much," Delphine said. "I feel I should pay her the same courtesy. But I would be very happy if she came over tomorrow."

"I think she'd like to come over," Shay said, capitulating, ignoring the spike of anxiety. "Touch base with her tomorrow."

"Okay, I will. Thank you for the advice," Delphine said. She leaned down and touched her lips ephemerally to Shay's. "Good night, Shay."

Shay sucked at her lips, considering Delphine's, but knew that the pace was her own to set, that
Delphine was demonstrating the patience she professed. Shay reached up and brushed her fingertips against Delphine's chin. "Good night, Delphine."

On impulse Shay leaned up and gave Delphine's lips a quick peck.

The contact left a smile on Delphine's mouth.

Chapter End Notes

I was reassured Delphine was not too much in this chapter.

(I think Delphine was too much in this chapter but honestly it's too fun not to write.)
The dawn-adjacent knock on Shay's door arrested Shay in place with instantaneous incredulity.

No way would Delphine show up at this hour unannounced.

Frozen before her open closet, a sports bra in hand, Shay suppressed a laugh. If her mind responded to an unexpected visitor with the assumption that the caller was Delphine—she was in trouble.

The reality behind the door proved more troubling. Cosima smiled at Shay, the expression wan upon lips threatening to crack and eyes exhibiting a pink prelude to bloodshot. "Hey."

"Cosima," Shay said, alarmed by the gravel in Cosima's voice. "Hey. Are you alright?"

Surreptitiously, but not eluding Shay's notice, Cosima peeked beyond Shay into the apartment, as if surveying the space and its contents. "Yeah. Fine. Super." Meeting Shay's eyes with her tired ones, Cosima held up a canister. "Would you like some tea?"

Shay frowned.

Evidently not too tired to observe, Cosima said, "Don't believe me?" Cosima leaned forward and put her forehead on offer. "Check for yourself."

Prudence urged Shay to ignore Cosima's theatrics, but memory cultivated the panic of having Cosima collapse into her arms, a hot ball of fever and incoherency. With reluctance but resignation, Shay discovered with the back of her hand that Cosima's skin was cool and dry.

Cosima smirked. "Fever?"

"No." Shay retracted her hand and gripped the doorframe.

Cosima's smirk widened with triumph, but transformed into a tight-lipped seal of consternation as she trapped a cough behind her mouth. Shay mustered her features to display what she hoped was no more than an acceptable amount of concern. The assault wracked Cosima's frame in syncopated barrages, muffled by the force of willful suppression, that halted in a stillness of caution. Shay reached out and gently rubbed Cosima's arm. "Come inside."

Shay situated Cosima at the table. Cosima held out the canister of tea. Clearing her throat, which did little to eliminate the texture of her voice, Cosima explained between leveling breaths, "Tieguanyin. It's an oolong."

Shay took the canister and ferried it into the kitchen. She set it down on the counter, took down a glass, and filled it with water. Returning to Cosima, she placed the glass before Cosima, as if in barter. Cosima flashed her a grateful smile and sipped. Shay leaned against the table's edge.

"Thanks," Cosima said, inhaling heavily. Cosima eyed her. "You're not going to make tea?"

"You sure you want tea?" Shay asked. "I've got chrysanthemum, if you want that instead."

Cosima's brow furrowed. "Why do I feel like we've had this conversation before?"

"Because I think we have," Shay confirmed. "And . . . you look just as tired now as you did then."

Cosima pouted. "You're not making a girl feel good about herself."
"I'm not trying to make you feel good—yet," Shay said. "I'm trying to determine if you're okay."

Cosima gave her a lopsided smile. "I . . . am in the mood to drink good tea with pleasant company. If you feel like you have to observe all these obligations because you're the host here, we could go upstairs where I can be the host and you can be the guest."

Shay lifted an eyebrow. Unfairly, Cosima hit close to the mark, but Shay felt no inclination to reverse roles.

"I can make the tea," Cosima proposed. "Here or upstairs."

Adopting a small smile, Shay gestured at the range top in permission. As Cosima filled the kettle with water, Shay pulled down a teapot and teacups and set out the ring of measuring spoons by the canister. As the water heated up, Cosima contemplated the teapot. "Do you have a smaller one?"

"Like a single-serving teapot?"

"That'd be perfect."

With mild confusion and curiosity, Shay pulled down a smaller teapot, a stone number with a serpentine dragon curled around the curve of the body. Shay loved the look of it but it was troublesome to clean.

Cosima beheld it with a smile and plucked off the lid to peek inside. There was no basket to hold the tea leaves but perforations in the pot's side prevented loose leaves from spilling down the spout. Most of the time.

"Do you like oolong?" Cosima asked.

Shay smiled as she exchanged the sizeable teacups for the small, darkly varnished ones in the dragon teapot's matched set. "I drink most teas."

Cosima smiled at the sight of the cups. "Those are adorable."

Shay giggled and held one up pinched between her fingers in display. "Aren't they? My brother bought me this set."

"The one who tries to overfeed you?" Cosima wondered.

Shay laughed. "Yeah, that one."

"He's giving big brothers a good name." Cosima snatched up the measuring spoons and wrangled the lid off the canister. "The key to preparing oolong, they say," Cosima said, scooping out tea, "is lots of tea leaves, short steeping time, like thirty seconds a go, and lots of subsequent steepings. The flavor changes with each round."

Shay leaned against the counter and crossed her arms. "How many rounds will we go? A full ten before seven o'clock?"

Cosima glanced at the clock. "Ten's ambitious, but if we're efficient we could make it."

Shay grinned.

"I'll let you go by seven o'clock," Cosima announced. "Promise."

"That's not what I meant," Shay said.
Cosima shrugged. "Even if it wasn't, I know you have to get to work."

Which wasn't a recognition of Shay's intent.

When the kettle whistled, Cosima drowned the leaves and replaced the kettle on the range, keeping the whistle cap flipped back and spinning the output dial to low. Roughly thirty seconds later Cosima poured round one standing at the counter, dividing the volume of the teapot into the two cups.

"You don't want to sit?" Shay asked, picking up a cup that contained what might generously be termed a sample serving, left hand acting as a saucer since the cup lacked handles.

Instead of answering Cosima brought her cup up to her nose and sniffed. She smiled. "Good smell."

Shay imitated her example. Cosima was right.

The tea was too hot to Shay's first timid attempt but the temperature didn't deter Cosima. The tea didn't much interest Shay—though the liquid's impression in her mouth hinted at a leaf that could be heavy but had been steeped far short of its reach and yet held teasing hints of nuttiness—but Cosima's mood did. They drank quietly in measured sips. Almost sleepily. But companionably. Despite the exhaustion telegraphed by Cosima's eyes, contentment characterized the indulgence with which Cosima soaked in the tea. Observing her companion, Shay had to admit the warmth and the clean flavors were relaxing. It wasn't the worst way to set the tone for the day. Not exactly meditation, but the calm and peace of the moment were restive.

The teapot was refilled. They waited.

With the second cup cooling in her hands, Shay began. "Did you sleep okay last night?"

"I slept," Cosima said, squinting into the dark depths of the teacup as if the black background might surrender a hint of the tea's color.

"Would you like some licorice? I have some. It might help with the cough."

Cosima shook her head. "The cough is annoying but it didn't keep me up." Cosima shrugged. "I've got a lot to do."

Shay hesitated. If Cosima's preoccupation stemmed from work, it seemed odd that Delphine would overwork her patient. If Delphine wasn't aware or Cosima was drowning herself in extracurricular activities . . . Shay envisioned Delphine confronting Cosima and imagined it not going well. "Yeah?"

Cosima blew across the top of the liquid. "Yeah. I thought it would be nice to take a timeout this morning."

A tea break didn't necessitate company. It wasn't the disruption of her morning routine that unsettled Shay, but her curiosity regarding Cosima's motivations in making the trip downstairs at the early morning hour. Shay didn't press.

Round three. Cosima wasn't sticking to strict timing in the steeping, but the tea was changing subtly in texture and strength—or maybe Shay's mind, primed by Cosima's prelude, conjured the emerging sweetness.

"Did I interrupt anything?" Cosima asked abruptly as she poured.

"This morning? Nothing much. I was going to do some yoga, maybe meditate afterward."
A flash of a frown crossed Cosima's mouth though her concentration remained on her task. "Sorry."

"It's okay," Shay said. "The tea's good."

"San Fran has a pretty sprawling tea community. It's awesome. Lots of tea tastings and chill zones. Though you can definitely have too much tea in one sitting."

"You bought this tea in San Francisco?"

Cosima nodded. "I picked up a good stock before I moved. I mean, I could restock by ordering online but I like consulting with the shop owners. They know their teas the best, like if a year's harvest affected the quality and in what ways. If they decide not to pick up a certain variety, they usually have a reason and are happy to tell you."

Shay smiled. "I'm sure you can find a quality tea shop here in Toronto."

"You don't know one?" Cosima wondered, the surprise in her voice evident.

"I've been to a few cafes, a shop or two, but there isn't one I visit regularly."

"We should explore the scene," suggested Cosima.

"We could," agreed Shay.

Cosima sipped, savored, and downed the remainder. Spinning the cup on the countertop, Cosima remarked, "You know you could have told me to—buzz off."

Shay halted midway through a sip and lowered the cup from her lips. "When a friend shows up at your door early in the morning without warning—I give them the benefit of the doubt that they have a reason."

Cosima shook her head. "Just tea."

Shay nodded. "Okay."

"Do you usually meditate in the mornings?" Cosima asked.

"Not every morning, but I try to if there's time," confirmed Shay.

"Do you meditate with other people?"

"Here or like in a class?" asked Shay.

"Either," Cosima said.

"When I was introduced to meditation, I had someone to guide me," Shay said. "Since then I've tried going to a few classes and groups, but it's usually not convenient in terms of scheduling, so I meditate alone. I mean, I don't mind meditating alone. I think there was something—special about having that experience of a one-on-one introduction that I don't get from a group setting. Though there are classes for different types of meditation I'm curious about."

"Cool, cool," Cosima said. "Does it ever . . . take you somewhere else?"

"You mean like have I had an out of body experience or touched enlightenment?" Shay asked with a smile. She shook her head. "That's not how it works—at least not that I've found. It's more like . . . centering yourself and taking the time to listen—to your surroundings and your body, to your
thoughts. It's about being present more than getting lost."

"That sounds way less fun than I thought it would."

Shay smiled. "I wouldn't say meditation is about fun, per se. Like this, right now? The way you're taking the time to make the tea, to smell it and taste it, paying attention to how the cup feels in your hands, and how the tea lands on your tongue, and how the flavors are changing? That mindfulness? That's meditation. It's not like weed. It's not about untethering—the opposite, really. Meditation is grounding."

"Okay. Yeah." Cosima contemplated the meeting point between the walls and the ceiling and then refilled the teapot. "I feel like I should invite you to come upstairs for a mind-altering experience."

Shay giggled. "I'm not a big fan of weed, actually. It makes me feel paranoid. I'm one of those people."

"Ah, so you've tried it," Cosima lamented. "If that's what it does to you, no wonder you need meditation."

"Thanks," Shay drawled.

"Although, you know," Cosima said, "or maybe you don't, but edibles and, or vaping might not produce the same side effects."

Shay laughed. "I didn't know."

"It's worth testing," Cosima declared in a lilting sing-song.

"Maybe," Shay allowed. She smiled. "You're welcome to join me for meditation. For yoga, too."

Cosima's eyebrow flicked up like a springboard for skepticism.

"It's worth testing," Shay parroted at Cosima.

Cosima smirked and, motioning for Shay to finish her cup, poured the tea.

Round four.

"Honestly less keen on the idea of meditation if it's not going to transport me to another plane."

Shay studied Cosima. "Are you trying to escape this one?"

Cosima, steaming her face over the vapor wafting from her cup, said, "Wouldn't you, if you were in my position?"

Shay released a soft sigh. "The thing is there are all these people who want you to stick around in this one. It's worth keeping in mind. Like an anchor."

Cosima eyed her in a concentration of consternation. "Okay, that started out like a cheesy PSA that should have ended with a reassurance that you're one of the people who's rooting for me and wants me to stick around, but I'm not sure that's where it ended up." Cosima circled the tea beneath her nose. "Do you need a pep talk? What plane did you run off to?"

Shay shook her head, mouth attempting a wistful smile. "A selfish, self-centered one, where the pep talks fell on deaf ears—and there were a lot of them."

"So you're not expecting much from me," Cosima said, grinning.

"That's right," Shay said, light and playful. "I expect to be pretty much completely ignored."

"Well, I can say this," Cosima said, bringing the teacup to her lips, "you're way more than I expected."

Shay chuckled. "Was that a high bar to clear? I don't think you were expecting much from a friend of Delphine."

Behind her cup Cosima smiled. She sipped the tea. "It might be I was expecting something completely different. Or maybe I didn't know what to expect at all from someone who looked so happy to run into Delphine."

Shay bowed her head, as if looking into her teacup could hide her from view. She caught a dim reflection of herself in the surface and raised the cup to her lips to obliterate the image.

Lowering the cup, Shay acknowledged, "Delphine and I are pretty different, aren't we?"

Cosima's eyebrows shot up in silent agreement.

Round five.

"You and Delphine being different isn't a bad thing," Cosima said, picking up the trailing thread. "For one, you and I get along."

"I don't think it's Delphine's personality that keeps you two from getting along," hedged Shay.

"You think it's my personality," Cosima announced wryly.

Shay shook her head. Cosima and Delphine could be exasperating in frustratingly similar fashions. "No, that's not what I meant."

"Because I am a bag of sunshine."

"Are you?" Shay asked with a grin.

"Come upstairs and vape with me and you'll see," Cosima said. "I'm totally—radiant."

Shay shook her head. "My point, Ms. Radiant, is that I feel like if you and Delphine talked to each other—"

"Like you and I are talking?" Cosima asked.

"Exactly. If you can talk to me, you can talk to Delphine. Like this. Because I can talk to Delphine like this—"

Cosima grinned. "And by the laws of the transitive property, Delphine and I should get along?"

"Yes," Shay concluded blandly.

"Are you that keen to see me and Delphine get along?" Cosima asked.

"I think... it would reduce a lot of stress," Shay said.

"My relationship with Delphine doesn't stress me much," Cosima said.
Shay couldn't so much as fumble a response to that.

"The work we do . . ." Cosima elaborated to Shay's dumbstruck stare, "yeah, that stresses me out. But I'm committed and if she's committed—that's all I need from her."

Shay's brow furrowed. "You don't think she's committed?"

Cosima shrugged. "I don't know if any of us know how deep the rabbit hole goes. I mean I know where the bottom is for me—about six feet under."

Shay's heart lurched.

"Not that look, please," Cosima said quietly, lips curved in a tired smile.

Shay turned away to master her features, though the admonition felt unfair when Cosima aimed for brash and bluster. Cosima filled the teapot in a composure grown stern. Shay, who had yet to taste the cup in her hand, drained it in silence.

Round six.

"I think Delphine has a lot on her mind right now," Cosima said in deep contemplation of the trails of steam wafting from the tea.

A knot tightened into a hard stone in the pit of Shay's stomach.

Cosima added, "We all do. In the lab. There's a lot going on and we're all sorta . . . scrambling. I think we're all going to have to make our own choices."

Shay ran her fingertips along the edge of the cup. "Are you allowed to talk about this?"

Cosima raised an eyebrow. "I haven't said anything specific." Her lips pulled back to expose a canine. "Delphine must be extremely cautious in how she talks around you if she's got you trained like this."

Shay chuckled. "Delphine is just . . . careful."

"Mmm, I bet," Cosima said, taking a sip. "You don't think I'm careful?"

"It's not that. I know you're careful. I think it's more that . . . I don't want you to let something slip that you don't want to and regret it later."

"That's interesting," Cosima said.

"I can be nosy," Shay admitted, "and I guess, yeah, maybe Delphine has gotten me to check myself on this topic."

"Huh. How did she manage that? Maybe I can use the same techniques on her."

"To do what? Curb nosiness? Is Delphine nosy?" Shay couldn't help but ask. There was a fine line between curiosity and nosiness and Shay posited herself positioned on one side and Delphine on the other.

Cosima conducted a careful swirl of the liquid in her cup. "If I'm being honest? Not as nosy as I thought she'd be."

Hesitant, but spying the opening, Shay asked, "Nosy about—things other than your medical history?"
Why would she pry into anything else?"

Cosima shrugged. "Maybe I'm projecting."

If Cosima meant she was projecting her own curiosity, that required no stretch to recognize. Cosima's interest plotted a graph of consistency in the frequency with which Delphine popped up in their conversations. "You could ask Delphine your questions directly."

"Oh, I have," Cosima said breezily.

A little stunned, Shay asked, "Did she answer you?"

"She gave answers," Cosima said to her teacup with nonchalance.

Cosima's tone bent Shay's brow. "Were the answers . . . unsatisfying?"

"They were answers," Cosima presented ambiguously. "Delphine knows how to give answers." Almost as a non sequitur, Cosima declared, "DYAD's an interesting place to wind up. It attracts interesting people."

Cosima tossed back the contents of her cup.

Round seven.

Cosima reached for her cup, paused, and snapped her fingers. "I have to return your—the stone tinger of your crockpot. And your tupperware. And your blanket. I meant to, but I wanted to wash it first, and then I forgot altogether."

Shay smiled, eased by the manageable topic. "I forgot about the blanket."

"I've been . . . kinda using it."

Shay's smile deepened. "You can hang onto it. Did you finish the congee?"

"Yeah," Cosima said easily. "I, uh . . . added a few things. But yeah."

Shay snickered. "I'm glad you improved it."

"I had a good base to build on," soothed Cosima.

"I'm glad you finished it," Shay revised.

"Thank you for making it," Cosima replied softly in a quality of tone that matched the sincerity of her gaze. They studied one another, the atmosphere soft, the softest Shay had yet to glimpse into Cosima. Maybe it was exhaustion catching up to Cosima. Maybe it was the tea.

Cosima set down her cup.

"It's getting close to seven," Cosima observed. "I said I'd let you go."

Shay glanced at Cosima's cup. "You didn't finish."

"I guess I didn't know my limit. I'll do better next time."

"Yeah?"

"If . . . that's okay?" Cosima asked with uncertainty.
Shay smiled. "As long as you give me a heads up next time."

"Done. Cool."

At the door, Shay put out her arms in an offer of a hug. In their embrace, Cosima said, "Thanks. I liked this."

Teasing, Shay said, "Then maybe there's a chance you'll like meditation."

Cosima pulled away with her canines displayed in a smirk. "Maybe—if it's with you. You want me to say hi to Delphine for you?"

"Are you going into work now? You're not going to rest?"

"Like I said, there's a lot of work to do."

"Okay," Shay said hesitantly. "Don't push yourself too hard."

"Tell that to my doctor," Cosima said wryly. "Actually, don't. She already told me the same thing. We'll see if she can stick to her own orders." Cosima scanned Shay's face. "Don't worry—work would be the best place for me to have issues."

Shay frowned. "The thing is now I know that's true."

Cosima grinned. "Puts everything I say into perspective, doesn't it?"

Shay glanced at her with a dose of side-eye. "No."

Cosima laughed.

* * *

"We need to talk," Cosima announced the moment Delphine stepped into the lab.

Delphine was startled to see Cosima already arrived and settled before the commencement of regular hours when the weekend had precluded rest and instead shuttled Cosima around greater Toronto from conspiratorial meeting to conspiratorial meeting, when Delphine herself had lain awake that morning fighting the buzz and clench of her innards around the question of what decision Cosima and Sarah would reach and the crossroads it might present for herself, and then, unexpectedly, smiling at the memory of Shay's laugh emerging against expectation and will—the opposed sentiments interchanging seamlessly like twists in a moebius strip. Delphine had expected Cosima tired, late, and evasive, not early, sitting in ambush, and direct. Recovering, Delphine said, "Good morning. Let me put down my things. Hi, Scott."

Scott waved.

"Should we . . ." Delphine said, indicating the door with a tilt of her head as she bent to set down her bags.

"Yeah," Cosima said, getting up and making for the door. Scott watched them in an air straining to be neither overly curious nor woefully dejected.

In the hall, Delphine proposed, "May we talk while I examine you?"

Cosima shrugged. "Sure, why not, let's be efficient."
Cosima closed the door of the examination room and ensured it was shut. She ran a hand over the handle, considering, then turned the lock. She scanned the room, particularly the corners of the ceiling, before sitting on the table and removing her cardigan.

"I don't know either," Delphine told Cosima as she dried her hands.

"You seem pretty chill for not knowing."

"Have you had breakfast?" Delphine asked as she took Cosima's temperature. "We can get breakfast after we're done here."

"Which would be the opposite of efficient and multitasking," grumbled Cosima. She scanned Delphine's face. "Have you had breakfast?"

Delphine held Cosima in suspense as she measured Cosima's pulse. "Coffee is fine for me."

Breakfast wasn't obtained from the DYAD cafeteria, but the muffin that Cosima bought from the Tim Hortons several blocks over could have come from the DYAD pantry. Delphine eyed the rime of melted sugar frosting with dubiousness as Cosima absentmindedly picked and tore off crumbs and nibbles as she maintained a sweeping vigilance from their corner table, as if she might discern spies among the other patrons.

Cosima began without warning. "We're going to try to broker a deal with Marion Bowles." She took a break from her surveillance to meet Delphine's eyes. "I—would you come with us?"

Delphine had no immediate reply.

Cosima said, "I can't do this alone."

Delphine tapped the side of her paper coffee cup. "There's a lot to consider."

Cosima chewed and leveled an expectant look on Delphine.

"This arrangement..." Delphine said. "I go with you and what happens to me? Do I simply... not show up for work one day? And the day after that? And all the days after that—and no one notices or shows up at my home asking questions?"

Cosima chased the muffin with tea and cleared her throat. "With how much oversight we get, you could probably get away with no one noticing for at least a week. After that—" Cosima shrugged, resuming her watch. "Marion Bowles is DYAD, or at least has ties to DYAD, and if she's going to pull strings for Sarah, I don't see why she can't do something for you. She'll get you 'reassigned' or something."

Delphine shook her head. "Marion Bowles is not interested in me. Obviously she approached me to establish contact with you."

"Well, I'm interested in you," Cosima snapped, eyes tracking a broad-shouldered man passing outside the storefront. "I can see to it that you're part of the deal."

"Like a piece of equipment you want to bring along," Delphine muttered.

Cosima's attention snapped around. "Don't put yourself down. You've got the most valuable piece of equipment." Cosima tapped her temple.

"You know that Aldous will not stand for this. Once you move, everything will be in the open."
"Marion has to outrank Leekie—or be able to outflank him," Cosima said, shredding muffin between her fingers. "We'll figure that out."

"Are you prepared for the possibility that once you leave the DYAD there may be nothing to return to?" Delphine asked softly.

"What's there to come back for now?" Cosima asked. "Besides your salary and stock options and retirement plan?"

"I do enjoy those," remarked Delphine.

"I know, I've seen your car. Is that what you're worried about?"

Delphine glanced at the young man at a table by the window—rather, near an electrical outlet. A nervous energy defined his engagement with his laptop, a textbook, and a slim volume bound in library aesthetics. Someone had a paper due, Delphine surmised. She remembered studying with such intent.

"Yes," Delphine admitted. "I need to be able to pay my rent to continue helping you."

"You can set up in a wing of Marion Bowles's mansion," Cosima proposed with cheer. "Maybe Charlotte could use a tutor. Or another one—that kid probably has like ten tutors. You can teach her biology and French."

"Please," muttered Delphine in dismissal. "It's not only that. It's retribution, Cosima. It's the others."

"The others?"

"Yes, the others, your fellow subjects who are sick—"

"You have a list of them or Marion can get the list. We can—"

"What about Jennifer?"

"What about Jennifer?" snapped Cosima.

"We just leave her at the DYAD and—what? Send over dosages of the treatment once we develop one?"

Cosima shrugged. "You can probably administer it to her personally."

"Because Aldous and the DYAD will be so accommodating," Delphine said dryly.

"With any luck, Leekie won't be able to hang on to his job after we're gone. And, you know what, there's nothing more you can do for Jennifer right now. The question of her welfare is obsolete if we don't develop any cure."

"I'm trying to think further ahead," Delphine said. "Aldous oversees the monitor program and has for some time. Given the breadth of his experience, I'm not sure the incentive will be so clear to replace him. And the others . . . it will not be easy to approach them openly. Those who are already ill are in DYAD facilities worldwide."

Cosima waved off Delphine's concern. "Marion Bowles will help us with that. Why wouldn't she?"

"I don't know," exhaled Delphine. "I'm thinking out loud."
Cosima's eyebrows drew tight. "If you don't want to help, just say so."

Delphine sat quiet, staring in the direction of the table in the opposite corner.

Cosima leaned back in her seat. "Okay. I get it. It'll just be me and Scott then. What are you going to do? Sit tight under Leekie's wing and wait for the next clone to monitor? If I disappear, it's going to look as bad on you as it will on Leekie."

Delphine shook her head and leaned forward upon her forearms, pressing her palms together so that she penned in her coffee cup. "That's not what I meant. I want to help. But I—I'm not in a position to see where this goes or what happens once you take this step. The way things are now at the DYAD, I can—I can keep an eye on Jennifer, I can shield you from Aldous. With Dr. Bowles . . . we don't know what she wants or how she will expect you to repay her help. I don't know what could happen to—" Delphine truncated her thought. She'd been on the verge of saying Shay. Cosima raised an eyebrow. Delphine cleared her throat. "I don't know what might happen to Jennifer."

Cosima wiped her fingers on a napkin, focused on the task, muscles in her cheek clenched tight. "We're not looking at a lot of options, Delphine. Which is the argument you—" Cosima wagged a finger at her. "—used on me and Sarah."

Delphine dragged her hands over her face. "I know."

"So you don't get to have cold feet suddenly," Cosima concluded irritably.

Delphine exhaled heavily. In the ensuing silence, Delphine said, "I don't know what that means."

"It means—" Cosima shook her head. "—lose your nerve." Cosima frowned and pushed up her glasses. "Are you actually scared of DYAD goons paying you a visit at home?"

Delphine imagined a knock falling on her door as Shay sat at her table. Opening the door. Suited men rushing in. Delphine sat back in her chair and nudged her coffee cup. "Were you able to discover the whereabouts of your previous monitor?"

Cosima's jaw ground in silence.

Delphine nodded.

"Will you come or not? If—if a deal happens," Cosima asked.

"I need to talk to Marion Bowles," Delphine said.

Cosima turned away and cleared her throat. She broke off a large chunk of muffin and engulfed it whole, chewed, paused, and slapped a hand over her mouth. Delphine studied the distressed consternation in the puff of Cosima's cheeks and hurried to retrieve a cup of water. She set it before Cosima and retook her seat.

Cosima sipped cautiously and then in large gulps. Breathing in gasps, eyes watery but relieved, Cosima managed, "Thanks."

Delphine nodded. "I want to assess the situation, Cosima. Can I do that?"

Dabbing at her lips with a napkin, removing signs of distress, Cosima threw up her free hand in impatience. "I can't—I'm not your boss. If that's what you want to do. This isn't a done deal yet. I wanted to give you a heads up."
Delphine sipped her coffee. Putting the cup down, she nodded. "Thank you."

Cosima picked at the remainder of the muffin. "I could really use your help on this."

Delphine closed her eyes. When she opened them she was still in the Tim Hortons, the street outside bathed in the sun's glow. She glanced at the disintegrating muffin and the growing mess of crumbs. "You should eat that. Take your time."

On the walk back, Cosima tapped Delphine's arm and whirled on her, bringing them to an abrupt halt on the sidewalk. "What are your real concerns?"

Delphine's brow furrowed and then relaxed as she exhaled. "You. And that muffin that probably had more sugar than is good for daily consumption. But your weight has fallen, so perhaps it should not be a concern."

"No, seriously," Cosima said. "What's scaring you?"

"That it is very cold as we're standing here and that I would like to get you inside. May we keep walking?"

"Not until you answer me," Cosima said.

"Cosima—"

Cosima spread her hands in expectant demand.

Delphine crossed her arms and glanced about at the other huddled pedestrians. "Why did we walk?"

"Because you didn't offer to drive, I don't have a car, and, I don't know, the exercise is good for me. Or something. Now what's bothering you?"

"Walk, please," Delphine urged, setting off. Cosima lingered and then grudgingly swung into motion.

"Hey, my legs aren't as long as yours!" Cosima called out.

Delphine slowed her pace. When Cosima caught up, Delphine said, "I informed you of my worries."

"Okay, but the thing I didn't hear you mention was your worry about finding a cure. Because I think if that were your first priority, everything else would take a backseat. Delphine, we finally have a real chance. Are you afraid of falling flat on your face now that we're in striking distance? Because if fear of failure is holding you back—"

Delphine grabbed Cosima's jostling arm and brought them to another standstill. "I am afraid that if we approach this incorrectly, we all die before we get a chance to even run a blood test."

Cosima nodded, unflinching, eyes intent on Delphine's. "I can tell you that staring down your mortality is actually a pretty good motivator."

Delphine released Cosima and exhaled in an explosive cloudburst. "I'm sorry. What is that saying in English about devils and the risk of change?"

"Better the devil you know?" Cosima asked.
Delphine nodded.

Cosima raised an eyebrow. "You suggested going to Marion Bowles."

"Because I wanted to give you options."

"You didn't see yourself involved in the next step?"

"It wasn't on my mind at the time," Delphine said. With a sigh, she resumed walking.

"Hey!" Cosima said, rushing to rejoin her.

"I've had time for reflection," Delphine confessed when Cosima came abreast.

"Meaning now you want to walk away?" Cosima asked.

Delphine shook her head. "Cosima . . . do you think anyone walks away from something like this?"

"I mean that you want to walk away from us, that you want to stay on DYAD's side," Cosima said.

Delphine plunged her bare hands into her pockets to shield them from the elements. Cosima looked up at her expectantly.

Delphine tucked her chin in against a chill wind. Very softly, so that perhaps the wind might snatch her words, she said, "That's not what I want."

"Then come with us," Cosima said, throwing her arms out. "What's the problem?"

Delphine shook her head. Meeting Cosima's eager gaze, she turned around the inquiry. "What are your concerns? What are you afraid of?"

Cosima smirked.

"Besides that," Delphine said softly, capitulating to the acknowledgement that if either of them should be fearing death, it was Cosima.

Cosima shrugged. "Sarah? Sarah flying off the handle, Sarah going solo, Sarah going MIA—"

"MIA?"

"Missing in action. In other words, disappearing."

Delphine nodded.

"We wouldn't be where we are without Sarah and she makes flying by the seat of her pants work most of the time—she's like a cat with nine lives—but—" Cosima shook her head. "You're right, we don't know how this is going to play out with Marion Bowles—but I didn't know how it was going to turn out with Leekie and—hey, I'm still here."

They trekked in silence.

Out of the blue, Cosima said, "I saw Shay this morning."

Delphine didn't slow. "As you were leaving?"

"No, I went down and had tea with her."
Delphine nodded.

"She says hi," Cosima volunteered.

Delphine nodded.

"Actually, she didn't say hi," Cosima said quickly. "I offered to tell you she said hi, but she didn't take me up on it. I don't think it means anything, though. It sort of, uh, got lost in the rest of the conversation."

Delphine smiled.

"She has, um—Shay has a way of making people feel comfortable. So I get it. I get why you like being around her."

"Why are you telling me this?" Delphine asked.

"I don't want you to get the wrong impression."

"What's the wrong impression?"

"That I'm hitting on Shay."

Delphine smiled. Reflexively. Widely. In lieu of laughter. Reining in her traitorous mouth, Delphine said, "You could have kept your meeting with Shay to yourself. Then I wouldn't have gotten any impressions."

"I wanted it out there just in case Shay mentioned it," Cosima said. "And gave me a bad report."

Delphine's brow dimpled. "Why would she give you a bad report? About what? That you were hitting on her?"

"No!" Cosima said. "She wouldn't say that because I didn't hit on her."

"Then what would the bad report regard?"

"I don't know—how I looked?"

"How did you look?" Delphine asked.

Cosima waved her hands in loose-wristed exasperation. "I don't know—like I needed sleep? I didn't look in a mirror."

Delphine nodded. "You do look like you need sleep. If I heard a report like that, it would only confirm what I myself can see."

"Whatevs!" Cosima exclaimed.

This ranked among the odder turns of conversations she and Cosima had passed. Delphine licked her lips to lend them moisture. "Cosima?"

Cosima glanced over in question.

"How long have you known that Shay is gay?"

"Why?"
"Just curious," Delphine said.

Cosima's brow dipped in thought. "Maybe since . . . like a week after I moved in."

Delphine bit back a sigh. Ridiculous. All of them tiptoed around a fact all of them knew. But just as Shay had refrained from mention of Cosima's sexuality, Delphine doubted Shay would have related Cosima's morning visit—unless something about Cosima's appearance or behavior had raised alarms.

Cosima trudged in an air of consternation. "Why did you ask me that?"

Delphine shook her head. After a pause, she asked, "What if they come after Shay?"

"Who?"

"They. Aldous. Marion. I don't know. How many competitors do you think the DYAD has?"

"Why would they go after Shay? She's just your friend."

"You went after Shay," Delphine pointed out.

"To annoy you," Cosima said, emphatic. "Not to hurt her."

Delphine shrugged. "Scott is your friend."

"And he happens to be a sequencing tech," Cosima said. "I don't think Shay's going to namaste any cures or clones into existence."

"Yes, but they could try to hurt me through her. Or blackmail me."

"Would that work?" Cosima asked carefully.

Delphine shook her head. "You didn't go after Shay because you thought it would be a waste of time."

"I saw a chance to rattle you," Cosima insisted. "And I got over that. Shay and I are cool. Shay's cool."

"That's great. I'm glad you realized that. I hope that anyone who potentially means her harm comes to the same conclusion," Delphine remarked drily. "Maybe they'll have a cup of tea with her and decide it's better to leave her alone."

"Shay's not on anyone's radar," reasoned Cosima.

"You don't know that," Delphine said softly.

"Why would she be?" Cosima countered.

"Because I visit her," Delphine said. "Because you visit her. How does Marion Bowles know where to send a car to pick us up?"

Cosima shook her head. "Paperwork? DYAD has my address. They have your address. They don't have paperwork on Shay."

"How did Aldous know about Scott?"

"Scott applied for a job."
The DYAD Institute loomed a block ahead. Cosima turned to Delphine, hand light on Delphine's forearm to slow her to a stop. "Shay's not coming with us. She's not involved. She's fine. She's going to be okay."

Delphine avoided Cosima's eyes.

"If you're that concerned about Shay's welfare, then—stop being her friend," Cosima said. "But it's not like she's a choice in this situation. Whether or not you come with us doesn't affect her."

Delphine took a deep breath. "That doesn't change that it's best to take the stock."

"Take the stock?" Cosima asked carefully, brow twitching.

"Of the situation," Delphine said.

"Right," Cosima concurred with a sharp nod, turning a circle. She wiped at her mouth, then put her hands on her hips and nodded. "Okay. Roger. Good talk."

Delphine stared at her shoes and consulted silence. "You know that Dr. Bowles may ask the same of me that Aldous did."

Cosima took a sharp breath, opened her mouth, shut it, and shook her head. "Delphine, if I could pay you, I would pay you." She filled her lungs and then let out a bitter laugh. "If I had the money, I wouldn't deal with any of this bullshit."

Delphine rocked back on her heels. "That's not what I meant."

Cosima rubbed at her temple. "I didn't think I'd have to convince you."

Delphine nodded.

"So why am I standing here trying to convince you?"

"I didn't ask to be your monitor, Cosima," Delphine said softly.

"No, you just wanted to work for some assholes. Well, guess what happens when you work for assholes?"

"Cosima," Delphine attempted to soothe.

"They make you an asshole!" finished Cosima, frustration bursting forth.

"I am on your side," Delphine countered evenly.

"Then act like it!"

"I'm not allowed to think about my side, too?" Delphine pointed out, keeping her tone even. "I will be among the happiest to see you get well—but I am trying to weigh the factors that let me help you and live to see that happen."

Cosima crossed her arms, jaw clenched like a sprung steel trap. Loosening by incremental degrees, Cosima said, "You're my doctor."

Delphine nodded.

Cosima glanced away. Her jaw worked side to side, relaxing. "I know you're not being an asshole.
Right now." Cosima breathed in deeply and reestablished eye contact. "I just meant to say that I—I could use your help."

"Be careful with Marion Bowles," Delphine said.

Cosima remained locked in her stare. Then she shook her head. "You're preaching to the choir."

"I don't know what that means," Delphine admitted.

"I know." Cosima unwound and lifted a tired hand to wave off Delphine. "The saying—it means I already know—well, more specifically, it means someone already holds the beliefs you're professing, so you don't have to lecture them. Come on. Scott's probably feeling left out."

Cosima trudged toward the DYAD Institute without waiting for Delphine. After a second, Delphine followed.

* *

It was only outside the laboratory door that Delphine clutched Cosima's arm. "Wait. You keep saying that you're going to take Scott with you but—he doesn't know."

Cosima, eyes tired and disinterested, said, "Yeah?"

"You don't think that will be a problem in making him follow you out of the DYAD?"

"You have a point, Doctor. Let's remedy that." Cosima swiped her security card over the lock.

"Cosima—"

"Scottie!" Cosima called out as she stepped inside. "There's something I have to tell you."

"Yeah?" Scott said from his seat at a computer station, looking up with uncertainty.

"Yeah," Cosima said, crossing the room to stand before him.

"O-okay," stuttered Scott.

"Scott." Cosima took a deep breath, faltering, but then simply stated, "I'm 324B21."

Scott tittered. Delphine covered her eyes. Cosima looked at Scott plainly.

Panic infiltrated Scott's eyes. "W-what?"

"I'm 324B21," Cosima repeated. "And we found the original geneticist who made me but we might need to leave this lab in order to work with him. And by 'we' I mean you, too. Is that okay? Is that cool?"

Features slack with astonishment, Scott looked from Cosima to Delphine. He stood up slowly. Cosima idly straightened the lapel of his lab coat. Words failed to emerge.

"I'm going to step out," Delphine announced quietly and left to give the friends the room.

It was going to be a long Monday and so far none of it conformed to any hopes Delphine had held upon waking.

But it was still morning and early. There was time to rectify that.
Having seen off her noon appointment, the prospect of lunch on her mind, Shay meandered to the reception desk where on the corner sat a bright bouquet of what must have been a dozen roses.

"These are nice," Shay remarked to Cheryl at the front desk. Cheryl watched Shay closely out of the edge of her glasses. "Did I miss a special occasion? It's not your birthday, is it? I thought that was in late winter."

"They're for you," Alvin called from the other end of the room.

"What?" Shay gasped, whirling on him.

"They are," Cheryl confirmed. "They arrived while you were with Hamon."

Disbelief flooded Shay's cognitive faculties, then amazement, then a mix of incredulity and gratitude, an uneasy pair that left Shay staring without words. With the attention of her coworkers on her, a faint blush radiating heat in her cheeks, Shay reached for the card.

*May I see you tonight? -D*

"Oh my God," Shay muttered to herself.

"You nab an old school romantic?" Cheryl asked Shay. Cheryl smirked over at Alvin. "Take notes, Alvin."

"Hey," Alvin protested. "I buy flowers for my wife every International Women's Day!"

Their chatter buzzed beneath the maze of emotions that pushed down Shay's brow. "Excuse me—actually, I'm going to take my break. Can I leave these here?"

Cheryl shrugged. "I've been enjoying them." She touched one of the leaves. "They're beautiful."

Shay issued a vague nod and retreated to retrieve her phone. Outside the clinic, out of sight, Shay cradled her phone and groped for thoughts.

To Delphine [1:22]: I got ur flowers?
From Delphine [1:25]: Good. They arrived.
To Delphine [1:25]: They did. Thank you. They're beautiful.
From Delphine [1:26]: Does that mean you like them?
To Delphine [1:26]: Yes. They're lovely.
From Delphine [1:27]: May I have an answer to my question? Will I see you tonight?

Shay filled her lungs and released the breath slowly.

To Delphine [1:28]: No surprises permitting, yes.
From Delphine [1:28]: I can't wait. Can you come over at 7?

Shay tilted her head back and leaned against the wall—smiling. Then she frowned, remembering Cosima's words from that morning. If Delphine didn't have the time, she wouldn't ask to see Shay, would she? Especially through an invitation like flowers. Shay stared down at her phone, fingers hovering over the screen.

To Delphine [1:30]: I can.
From Delphine [1:30]: I'll be waiting.
As if in testament to the conviction of their sender, the roses remained as vibrant, fragrant, beautiful, and surprising when Shay returned.

The cloud summation of the known aspects and mysteries of Project LEDA crowded the whiteboard with the diffuse and spreading chaos that Delphine felt encroaching on the sprawling blankness of possible developments dependent on the next steps. She stood back with crossed arms as silence pervaded the lab. Exhausted were the questions and clarifications Scott posed, the collective recollection of the analyses and diagnoses and avenues of solutions, the asides regarding the current inaccessibility of the list of all affected subjects in Delphine's possession, and the space in the corner of the board dedicated to naming key players.

A dull pulse of pain beat in Delphine's temple. She was probably dehydrated. She was certainly tired of coming up against their limitations.

Beyond the ripples of taxed exhaustion glittered the light of the evening's approach, reminding Delphine to breathe and relax.

"So," Scott said warily, "you're going to work for this Marion Bowles person?"

"Not work for her," Cosima said, slumped at a table with chin in hand. "Work . . . with her. Using her resources."

"Is that going to make a difference?" Scott wondered.

Delphine raised an eyebrow.

"It's going to have to," Cosima muttered. "We can't stay here."

"Why not?" Scott asked.

Delphine turned to Cosima with anticipatory interest.

"I mean," Scott amended quickly, "what's the difference between DYAD getting the information and Marion Bowles getting it?"

"The difference is that Professor Duncan has no inclination to work in the vicinity of Dr. Leekie," Delphine said quietly. "Or other hidden Neolutionists."

Cosima whirled in Delphine's direction but didn't contradict her words.

"Are you a Neolutionist?" Delphine asked Scott in a mild manner.

"No!" Scott exclaimed "I didn't even know that was more than a fringe thing until today."

"Then Professor Duncan should feel comfortable in your presence," Delphine assured him.

Cosima eyed Delphine. "He should be asking you if you're a Neolutionist."

Delphine glanced at Scott. "He could ask, but he doesn't know how to identify a Neolutionist." She sighed. "Neither do you or I or Professor Duncan, who's been in hiding for nearly thirty years. You see, that's the problem, Scott."

"Yeah, but do you know why they're worse than anyone else?" Scott asked.
Cosima was silent.

Delphine smiled to herself. "No. What we know is that Professor Duncan likely holds the key to unlocking a gene therapy and that's what we need. It may very well be that Marion Bowles moves to kill all of us in the end, but at the moment her aid offers a greater chance at living than we're looking at now."

"What about the stem cells?" Scott asked. "Isn't that something?"

"They're working," Delphine said quietly.

"Really?" Cosima asked.

Delphine nodded. "Your numbers are good and scans show no significant increase in the growth of the polyps. We might actually be seeing a reduction in some. But the stem cells are limited. If working with Marion Bowles is not an option, I would move to immediately start HLA tissue typing tests with Sarah. If you two are compatible, there are possibilities in a bone marrow transplant." She exhaled heavily. "The problem I see is that if you tip your hand to Aldous but discover you cannot work with Dr. Bowles, there may be no facilities at anyone's disposal to conduct any tests or medical procedures."

"We'll figure something out," Cosima said. "Right, Scottie? You in?"

Scott sat up. Determination thinned his lips and straightened his posture. "I'm in."

Cosima shot Delphine a look. Delphine met her eyes without flinching and said, "Until you speak with Marion Bowles, there's not much we can do here."

Cosima nodded. She turned to Scott. "Any other questions, Scottie?"

"One," he said reluctantly. "You said that there are 'hidden' Neolutionists, right? But what does that mean? Dr. Leekie wrote the book on Neolutionism, so obviously he's a Neolutionist, right? Why does that surprise anyone? What's so special or alarming about being a Neolutionist? And if Marion Bowles is someone just higher on the food chain—does she know what Dr. Leekie did? And if she knows, does she care?"

Both women stared at him. When at last they glanced at one another, Cosima said, "Shit. We've had our noses shoved up so close to the picture that we forgot to ask the elementary questions."

"These are questions you're going to have to ask," Delphine said quietly. "Or not. If Professor Duncan isn't aware of any connections between Aldous and Dr. Bowles, I'm not sure there's any obstacle to make him reconsider working with her."

Cosima covered her face and groaned. "We don't have time for this shit."

"Cosima," Delphine said quietly, catching Cosima's attention, "it's your call. Just as you are following Sarah's lead, there are people following yours."

She and Cosima took the measure of one another. Delphine's reference encompassed Scott, but she knew Cosima expanded it to include Delphine.

The clench of her gut signified to Delphine that she'd likely already reached the same conclusion.
The three of them packed up early.

Small mercies.

"Can I grab a ride home?" Cosima asked.

Delphine didn't raise her head from the task of stowing her laptop. "Sorry, no. I have errands to run."

Cosima raised an eyebrow. "Really?"

"The weekend put me behind," Delphine said simply.

The truth.

"Okay," Cosima said. "Well, I'll see you tomorrow."

Delphine nodded. "Tomorrow."

Nodding to herself, Cosima headed for the door. Delphine straightened up. "Cosima."

Cosima turned.

"When this is all over," Delphine said. "where do you see yourself?"

Cosima regarded her, expression rendered a void. Then she smirked. "I haven't thought that far ahead. But if I had to take a guess? On a beach. Sipping Mai Tais. Somewhere like Rio de Janeiro or Barcelona."

"Barcelona? Why Barcelona?"

Cosima shrugged. "It has a beach. It has a gay scene."

Delphine nodded slowly. "I see. That would be nice."

Cosima arched an eyebrow. "The beach or the gay scene?"

Delphine smiled, chuckling softly to herself. "I'll see you tomorrow. Good night."

Cosima appraised Delphine for a lingering second. What she saw—or thought she saw—or wanted to see—Delphine couldn't have said.
Chapter 41

The halting steps of Shay's approach toward the desk projected a frazzled, harried uncertainty that put the man seated behind it on alert. A detour had delayed Shay for longer than she'd anticipated, her GPS signal had cut out twice in the city, she'd missed the final turn and still had to circle the block twice to find the entrance to the underground garage, had had to squeeze the Bug into a parking space by a pillar, and now the man Delphine dubbed concierge was eyeing the item in Shay's hands. Shay felt judged. As if the man had discerned in a glance the entire story of her journey and knew that somehow Shay had found a way to squander the extra time she'd given herself to arrive by seven—or even earlier. Which was silly. Of course this stranger couldn't know all that. But he could judge her air of disarray. Shay felt he did.

"Hi," Shay said. "I'm here to see Delphine Cormier. She lives in—in 9E?"

"Your name?" the man asked.

"Shay."

"One second, please," he said, holding up a finger and picking up the phone with his other hand. "Hi, this is James from downstairs. There's a—ah. Yes. That's right. I'll send her right up." James replaced the phone in its cradle and smiled at Shay, his demeanor abruptly warm. "Head on up, ma'am. The elevators are over there."

Shay shared the elevator with a man who stepped on after her, surveyed Shay's cargo, and then flashed a tight-lipped, polite, but awkward smile. Shay nodded and severed eye contact to stare at the rising numbers on the display, relieved to see that he'd pressed the button for the fifth floor. The four floors she ascended alone allowed Shay the solitude to acknowledge she was in Delphine's building going to meet Delphine in Delphine's apartment. Not as her friend. Exactly. Shay took a deep breath as the slowing car pushed her heels into the floor.

On the ninth floor, gilt-lettered signs relied on people's grasp of English alphabetical order. In idle distraction a corner of Shay's mind wondered if foreigners ever felt stymied by such an index. What were the analogous organizational systems used in countries like China or Japan or Russia or any locale with scripts far removed from English? Did they use the English alphabet?

Arriving at 9E provided no answers but ceased trackless musing. This was it. Delphine's apartment. Shay took a fortifying breath. Neither reconsideration nor retreat remained possible options. Delphine knew she was in the building. Shay raised a hand to knock—and noticed the glow of a doorbell button. Shay's hand detoured. And hovered. The indecision cost another second.

The button gave easily beneath Shay's touch.

The door didn't fly open immediately, as Shay half-expected, but she didn't wait long to be greeted by a grinning Delphine. "Hello. You're on time."

"I am?" Shay wondered, knowing full well seven on the dot had come and gone.

"You're here," declared Delphine triumphantly. Her eyes dropped to the gift occupying Shay's hands. "What's this? Is this one of yours?"

Shay held out the ceramic pot. "No, I got this guy especially for you. It's a snake plant. I know it's not very colorful, but it can lend a little green."
Delphine chuckled and took it from Shay. "Thank you." Leaning past the spiraling tendrils, Delphine bestowed on Shay's lips a soft kiss. "Come inside."

Shay obeyed with a flicker of hesitation. Her gaze ran ahead of her, casting about the foyer and beyond, but a wonderful aroma superseded all other impressions. "Something smells amazing."

"Dinner," Delphine declared, attention on the plant in her hands, but cheerful pride unrestrained.

"It's a really hardy houseplant that doesn't need much water," Shay said, "meaning it can weather a little neglect."

Delphine tsk'ed. "You expect me to neglect it?"

"No, I was thinking about how it would remove air pollutants in your apartment."

That summoned the wry smile Shay anticipated. Delphine set down the snake plant on a side table in the short hall, so that the tendrils flirted with the corded phone mounted on the wall. "May I take your coat?"

"Ah, yeah, sure." Shay hastened to shrug out of her coat and nearly tangled herself in her scarf instead. Smiling, Delphine helped free Shay from her coat and hung it and the scarf in the nearby closet.

"Should I—" Shay glanced down at Delphine's feet and noted that her hostess wore a pair of pumps. The aborted inquiry prompted a raised eyebrow of question.

"I was going to ask about taking off shoes or keeping them on," Shay said.

"However you are most comfortable," Delphine assured Shay and stepped around her, hand alighting for a passing second against the small of Shay's back, to slip into the kitchen. "Excuse me, I have to check on dinner."

"The, um," Shay started as she tracked Delphine's path to the stovetop through the open floor plan. First-time guest jitters reduced Shay to trailing after Delphine like a stray dog. Unsure where to go, Shay stopped at the bar-like counter that separated the kitchen from the greater living area and leaned on it. "The flowers you sent me were beautiful. I wasn't going to try to top them."

Delphine threw a smile at Shay over her shoulder. "I didn't send them to make you feel like you had to compete."

Shay spread her hands helplessly. "I couldn't come over for the first time and not bring anything."

"So you brought the tongue of belle-mère," Delphine said, eyes alight with a spirit of laughter.

Shay opened her mouth. The effort crumbled into a self-deprecating smile. She hung her head. "If 'belle-mère' means mother-in-law, then, yes, the snake plant is also called mother-in-law's tongue."

Lifting her head, Shay said, "It's a good plant. It'll pay you back for the space it takes up."

"Yes. I believe you." Delphine gestured to encompass the space and Shay turned to conduct a survey at Delphine's indication. The apartment was filled and arranged in clean lines, geometric shapes, and dark woods. Modern. Shay wasn't surprised in the least. It was like walking into Delphine's predominantly black and white wardrobe writ into set pieces. Nothing in particular jumped out to Shay as flashy, but a heft of sophistication and deliberation rested in the resistance to flash in the muted colors. There wasn't a single plant. "It will have to work hard on its own, as you can see."
Shay pursed her lips. She raised a finger to point in the vague direction of the open space arranged as a living room. "Do you mind if I . . . ?"

"Make yourself comfortable," Delphine insisted. "Dinner needs a little more time. Would you like something to drink? I can open a bottle of wine. I bought a white for dinner and a red for dessert."

"Red for dessert," Shay repeated with uncertainty.

"Red for dessert," Delphine affirmed.

Shay nodded, but said, "I drove here."

"Ah, yes," Delphine said quickly. "Were you able to find a place to park easily?"

"I did. In the garage."

Delphine smiled. "Good."

"But my point is that I have to drive home," explained Shay.

"Trust me," Delphine said.

"Okay," Shay ceded. Cautiously, she asked, "What is for dinner?"

Smile widening, Delphine gestured to the pot on the range. "Would you like to see?"

Shay hesitantly entered the kitchen, unsure if the domain were inviolable space, but Delphine eagerly made room for her and removed the lid, unleashing a cloud of steam that filled the air with a mouth-watering fragrance. Stepping close, Delphine adjusting to hover behind her in close proximity that Shay found difficult to ignore, Shay peeked inside.

"Bouillabaisse," Delphine said.

Flabbergasted, Shay said, "You wanted to come over here last night and just whip this up?"

"Yes," Delphine said.

"It would have taken so much time," Shay remarked.

"Mostly in preparation," asserted Delphine. "And I would have had you for company."

Shay felt the blush rise in her cheeks and wished she could resent it. "It looks incredible. You didn't—you didn't have to go through all the trouble."

"It was no trouble," Delphine said, a note of unease in her voice that made Shay turn to face her. "If there was any, it was trouble I wanted to take."

Delphine scanned Shay's face. Shay avoided the scrutiny and looked about aimlessly. "Is there anything I can help you with?"

"Do you want to taste it?" Delphine asked. "There are still a few things I need to add, but you can tell me how it's coming along."

Delphine produced a spoon from a drawer at hand, skimmed a sample off the top, and held it out to Shay. Falling into a smile, Shay covered Delphine's hand and directed it down closer to her mouth to blow across the steaming liquid. When she deemed it cool enough, Shay brought her lips cautiously
to the spoon and tasted. Covering her mouth with a hand, Shay leaned back.

Delphine watched her with eager expectation. "How is it?"

Shay shook her head, hand dropping. "It's so unfair that you keep finding ways to surprise me."

Delphine laughed. "If you had come over sooner, this wouldn't be a surprise."

"It still would have been a surprise," asserted Shay, "just a surprise I would have had sooner."

"But is it a good surprise or a bad surprise?"

Shay smiled, as if grudgingly accepting defeat. "It's delicious."

"Please don't look so tormented about it," Delphine said with a burgeoning smile. "It puts your sincerity in doubt. Will you open the bottle of wine? You can have a look around while I finish up."

"There's nothing that needs to be done?" wondered Shay. "Does the table need to be set?"

"No," Delphine said, shooing her. "It is set. The wine and the glasses are on the table." She swiped an item off the end of the counter and held it out to Shay. "And here is the bottle opener."

"You sure you don't need help?" Shay asked, but this time because she knew the answer.

"I will ask for it if I need it," Delphine said. "Surely I am not like this when I am at your home."

"When you're at my place, you help yourself like you live there."

"Not when I visited the first time—"

"Under different circumstances," pointed out Shay.

"—and you could be doing the same here if you had come over sooner," finished Delphine, ignoring Shay's commentary.

"Can't you let me win one point?" Shay complained.

"Not this one, but I will let you look around because I know you are curious," Delphine said.

"In other words, you're giving me permission to be nosy."

"Yes."

Shay felt the smile on her face. Delphine directed her to a small offset area across from the kitchen outfitted with a dining table. Wine glasses, utensils, and napkins were set out before two adjacent chairs. A few minutes later, wine glass in hand and a few cautionary sips slipping into her stomach, Shay turned a circle in the living room area, noting the tall windows open to the panoramic view of the building across the street, two closed doors that led to rooms unseen, and an additional third door, ajar, beyond which a bathroom could be deduced. A flat screen television dominated one wall on a floating dark wood stand opposite a sumptuous sectional couch, the coffee table between them a bulky, layered structure of glass panels and compartments that surprised Shay for its girth. Magazines clogged the table's levels and upon closer inspection Shay realized they were medical and science journals. She imagined one of the many studies Delphine referenced lying within their pages. The prospect of Delphine handing one to her to prove a point felt prescient standing near the pile of lore. A bookshelf was similarly stocked with volumes on science. An edition of Mary Roach's Stiff made Shay start, reminding her that she had yet to read the copy her brother had sent her. Shay took down
the hardcover and paged through it, eyes taking in chapter headings.

For some reason the thought of Delphine reading pop science literature delighted Shay. Perhaps because it offered an overlap in their disparate libraries.

Delphine's decorative sense was minimal but more striking for the choices, such as the raucous calligraphy-esque triptych on canvas arranged on the wall above the couch, a marriage of messy partitioned into neat designated proportions. Display shelves held knickknacks—surprising to Shay for the possibility that Delphine had lugged pieces and mementos across the ocean—and framed photographs—none of featured or posing people, but a number of landscapes and cityscapes. It took a moment for Shay to recognize that some captured the streets of Paris. A study revealed that the people in the photographs seemed to be dressed in dated fashion. Shay picked up a frame, bringing the photograph close for examination, when Delphine called out.

"Dinner is ready."

Delphine set out two large bowls teeming with a handful of choice sea life—mussels, clams, shrimp, and fish—and one empty bowl for shells. Shay answered the summons and found Delphine holding a chair ready for her. Feeling a little silly, Shay sat. Amazement soon overwhelmed any self-consciousness as she beheld the dish. "Okay, question."

"Yes?" Delphine asked, taking a seat and scooting her chair closer to the table.

"If I had come over months ago, would you have made this?"

"At some point, most likely, yes. I will have to make fish à la meunière for you some time, as well."

Shay sat with spoon in hand, poised above the bounty. "Okay. sorry if this is completely off the mark, but I never pictured you cooking much. Is this something you make?"

Taking up her spoon, Delphine smiled. "You're right. I don't cook regularly—and usually not something this complex." She paused. "I have made bouillabaisse before. I had an ex who liked to cook—he made bouillabaisse a few times. Once or twice we made it together."

"So this is his recipe?" Shay asked, welcoming the tidbit with a small smile. Delphine seemed hesitant to make mention of her ex, but Shay appreciated her openness.

"No," Delphine said with a laugh, "this recipe is from the Internet."

Grinning, Shay opined, "this recipe is from the Internet."

"I honestly have trouble remembering," Delphine declared.

"No," Delphine said with a laugh, "this recipe is from the Internet."

"Well, I am grateful I can contact you whenever and from wherever. That is to say, constant connection seems a relatively small price to pay, I think, to be able to—" Delphine leaned forward.
"—call someone on the other side of the world at any time you wish, or in an instant translate languages you cannot speak, or search the collective library of human knowledge for a recipe to
impress a beautiful woman."

Shay stared at Delphine, unaware for possibly a few seconds that her lips were parted. "Delphine Cormier, you are . . ."

"Winning?" Delphine asked, teasingly. She raised her wine glass. "To your finally coming over."

Delphine's deft pace gave Shay's pride no choice but to swallow the pill of being outmaneuvered. Shay conceded and raised her glass. "To the chef and this amazing meal." She tapped the glass against Delphine's. "Thank you. Cheers."

"Santé."

The *bouillabaisse* was delicious. Unfairly delicious. Even Delphine seemed impressed. At one point, she said, "I'm glad I decided to make this first."

"I'm glad you made it at all," Shay declared contentedly. "It's so good. Thank you. It must have taken a lot of time, especially after work—I had no idea you had this planned."

Delphine raised an eyebrow. "Did you think I would make that pasta and cheese you buy in the blue box?"

"Macaroni and cheese?" Shay wondered.

"Yes."

"Have you tried it?" Shay asked.

"I was curious," Delphine said.

"How was it?"

"I'm less curious now," Delphine deadpanned.

Shay giggled. "Well, I had no idea what to expect. You sent me flowers this morning. At work. I think I'm just going to accept that I can't predict you."

A moment's contemplation held Delphine still. Breaking out of it, Delphine reached for the bottle of wine and refilled both their glasses. "I have this friend."

"Yeah?" Shay asked, curiosity piqued. Delphine didn't speak much about other people in her life.

"Yes, the other day I asked this friend for advice about a situation I'm experiencing." Delphine smiled mischievously and Shay understood, with a second's disappointment, that Delphine was speaking about her. "That involves expressing my feelings. For another woman. My friend said to invite this woman to my home. So I did. But do you know what my friend didn't say?"

"What?" Shay asked.

"To impress her."

Shay shook her head. "Delphine, I already think you're . . ."

Delphine raised an eyebrow.

Shay exhaled sharply. "You don't need to impress me. You've already done that."
"Not in this capacity."

"What capacity?" Shay wondered.

Delphine hesitated. "Domestically."

Shay laughed before she could check herself. She covered her mouth to soften the outburst while Delphine looked on, gaze flattening.

"I'm sorry," Shay said. "I—I don't think I ever would have imagined that you would feel the need to impress someone by—by cooking."

"Why not?" Delphine asked, not petulant, but skeptical.

Shay shook her head with wonder. "You . . . you have so many other accomplishments to recommend you. You know?"

"Which means I should not demonstrate I can cook?"

"No, I mean by this point something like cooking is more like . . . bonus points. Extra credit."

"I don't see why anyone wouldn't try for extra credit," Delphine said.

Shay smiled. "Of course, you wouldn't."

"Because extra credit," Delphine said, "isn't only about going above the maximum—"

"Overachieving," Shay supplied, "which you would strive for."

"Yes," Delphine said, raising a finger, "but extra credit is an opportunity to make up for deficits. You lose points in a weaker area, so you make up for them in another."

"So we agree that cooking is your extra credit," Shay said with a smile. "To make up for . . . ?"

Delphine wagged her finger. "I didn't say that cooking is my extra credit. And, besides, I can't make you feel welcomed and cared for?"

Shay didn't produce an immediate answer. "You can. Of course."

Eyes assessing, jocularity evaporating, Delphine leaned forward. "Shay, what's wrong?"

"Nothing's wrong," Shay replied reflexively. "Everything's been wonderful."

"I meant, what's bothering you?"

Shay reached toward her wine glass but didn't pick it up, resting her fingertips on the round base and idly rubbing the smooth surface as she arranged her thoughts. She could lie. Or evade.

Shay swallowed and returned Delphine's gaze through her eyelashes. "I don't want to think that—maybe you had a long day and came back to do—all this. Especially after you had a weekend where you had to work and hardly found time to rest."

Delphine nodded slowly. "I see." She set down her wine glass and moved her bowl out of the way to make room to cross her forearms upon the table. "You know, not everyone who sets out to become a doctor becomes a doctor. They make our classes and our training very difficult to discourage those who can't dedicate themselves. I'm not talking about passion—there are many
reasons people become doctors. I became a doctor because I wanted to become a doctor. The more I learned and studied, the more I felt inspired. When I work, it is what I want to do. It can be hard and frustrating, but also highly rewarding." Delphine smiled, but it was lined with weariness. "Today was a hard, frustrating challenge. Right from when I got to work. But do you know what made it feel lighter? When I got your text about the flowers. And when you said you would come over. It gave me something to look forward to at the end of the day." Delphine's smile widened. "I made dinner because I wanted to make dinner for you. It was a pleasure—to see you enjoy it and to be able to share it with you, here. So if you are feeling like this was some kind of burden for me—it wasn't. I don't want you to get that idea. You wouldn't allow me to think that way about anything you do for me. My motivations come from the same place yours do."

"Being a busybody?" Shay tried feebly.

"Care," Delphine countered, undeterred.

Shay took a deep breath. "I don't . . . want to be another thing that causes you stress."

"You . . . you are not a source of stress to me," Delphine said. "Most times you are the exact opposite. Can you believe that?"

Shay exhaled. "I could believe you if you reassure me that you won't overstretch yourself for me."

"No," Delphine said.

Shay blinked.

"I will exert myself as much as I want for you," Delphine said. "What you need to believe is that whatever I do, it will be exactly what I want to do."

Shay stared at Delphine. Then she gasped out short, sharp, incredulous chuckles.

"Is that not the standard you want me to have for you?" Delphine pressed.

Shay picked up her wine glass, shook her head—and smiled. She sipped and set her glass back down.

"Yeah," Shay acceded.

Delphine shrugged, as if to express c'est la vie.

"You know," Shay said, "you could try letting me win every once in a while."

Delphine smiled, that soft look in her eyes. "What do you mean? I'll win when you realize that you've already won over me."

Shay stared at her.

"Oh my God?" prompted Delphine in the silence.

Shay covered her mouth to hide the disbelief colonizing the grin that seized her mouth. When she grappled back composure, Shay said, "Let me help you with the dishes."

"No," Delphine said.

"Delphine," objected Shay.
"I'm the hostess tonight," Delphine declared. "Which I believe means that I set the rules."

Shay huffed.

"How does it feel?" Delphine inquired with great interest.

Shay sent her a displeased glare that had more bark than bite.

Delphine laughed. "The dishwasher will clean the dishes tonight. Meanwhile we can have dessert."

"So there's something that goes with the wine?" Shay asked.

Delphine's brow dimpled in brief confusion. "Yes."

"I wasn't sure," Shay clarified.

"You thought there would only be wine?"

"I told you, I'm not trying to predict anything anymore. And you did make me drink too much wine the first time we went out to dinner."

"I did?"

"You did. You ordered a bottle and then insisted that I help you finish it."

"Ah. But I didn't intend to make you drink too much. I did not want to waste the bottle."

"Do you intend to make me drink too much tonight?" Shay asked. "We did a good number on this white."

"No," Delphine said quickly. "But the wine will enhance dessert. I think."

"It's not port, is it?" Shay asked warily.

"No, no. Come. We can have dessert in the living room."

"We can?"

Delphine smiled.

*

The small remainder of white wine was corked.

"Will you drink it?" Shay wondered, given recent mention of avoiding wasted bottles.

"I'll cook something with it."

Despite her brash words, Delphine permitted Shay's help in clearing the table. Once at the sink, Shay casually took up the sponge and began to rinse plates and bowls and utensils, stacking each on the counter beside the basin. Delphine eyed her activity, but took up first a cleared plate and a bowl to fill the bottom rack of the dishwasher. The bowl of shells stymied Shay for a second, but Delphine pointed at a drawer that rolled out to reveal a trashcan.

As Shay handed her the emptied bowl, Delphine noted, "I have a right to be upset that you're not respecting my authority in my own home."
"I agree," Shay said evenly, "even though I think you enjoy undermining other people's authority, by which I mean my authority."

"Untrue," Delphine said. "Only your composure."

A flush of emotion indistinguishable from indignation or embarrassment raised a blush in Shay's cheeks.

"And only because I cannot resist the prospect of your reaction," Delphine added. "Which I understand reflects badly on me. But we all have vices."

Shay stewed for a moment, processing Delphine's brazenness. "I guess we've pinpointed one of your flaws."

"If you want to call it that." Delphine closed the dishwasher with a smile.

"You are so—" Shay cut herself off. "The really annoying thing is that I know you only act like that to get a rise out of me."

"That's what makes it adorable," divulged Delphine.

"That's so annoying," Shay reiterated.

Delphine's lips curved, limned with soft affection, but with hesitation dragging at the corners, as if aware her words had potentially abutted against a line. Shay shook her head, stepped to the sink, and washed her hands. "Are you going to exercise your right to be upset with your guest?"

Delphine's gaze was considering. "I think I would rather move onto dessert."

Delphine handed Shay a dish towel to dry her hands. Fuller bodied red wine glasses were produced from an overhanging drawer, the bottle of red wine uncorked, and everyone and everything ushered into the living room. Delphine motioned for Shay to take a seat on the couch, set the glasses on the coffee table, and poured two moderate measures. As the wine breathed, Delphine ducked back into the kitchen and returned with two flat boxes of different sizes that joined the wine on the coffee table. Curiosity afflicted Shay only in the second it took Delphine to remove the lid from the larger box.

"Chocolate," sighed Shay.

"Truffles," clarified Delphine. "Though I have to be honest: these are flavors I would not have considered combined with chocolate. I thought about going somewhere else, but it occurred to me that you might be curious about such flavors."

"Somewhere else? Where are these from?"

"SOMA Chocolates? Something like that."

"I think I've heard of them," Shay said. She tilted her head, grasping at associations. "It sounds familiar."

Delphine smiled. "In Paris, there are a number of famous chocolateries. I wish I could show you, but since I can't, I was hoping to provide a similar experience."

Delphine's word choice tugged at Shay's lips. "Similar, not equal?"

Delphine graced Shay with a look that conveyed exactly what she considered the likelihood of equivalence. "It may be that these strange flavors will be a blessing. I will have no grounds for
Delphine lowered herself onto the couch beside Shay, keeping herself contained to the cushion so that she sat within a measure of distance from her guest. Delphine held out the box to Shay. "Shall you go first?"

Shay surveyed the options with a critical eye. "Are they all different?"

"Yes. They told me their collection consists of twenty-six staple flavors in addition to a rotating number of experimental flavors. So I asked for one of each."

Shay stared at Delphine. "So there are like thirty pieces of big, heavy, rich truffles?"

"Yes."

Two thoughts seized Shay. The first was that dessert very possibly rivaled the cost of a full meal had they gone out. The second was that Delphine fostered ambitious expectations of how many sugary confections they could consume.

"Are we going to eat all of them in one sitting?" Shay wondered.

Delphine smiled. "I had not assumed that, but I don't see why we couldn't if we took our time. I was planning to suggest you return another day to try the rest—"

A soft chuckle rumbled out of Shay.

"—or send you home with the leftovers."

Shay nodded in consideration. "Okay. So you only got one of each. That means we should split them so that we can both try all of them."

"That . . . yes."

Delphine's tone implanted doubt into Shay. "No? You don't want to try all of them or you don't want to share?"

"The former makes me uncertain," Delphine admitted.

"Are the flavors that out there?"

"Yes," confirmed Delphine. She reached for the lid and extracted a small pamphlet. "They gave me this."


"Okay, I see what you mean," said Shay, though the majority read like pedestrian chocolate creations with fruits and nuts and honey and creams. She smiled. "You definitely have to try all of them."

Delphine's bravado crumpled. "I was afraid you would feel that way."

Shay raised her eyes. "Do you know why you should try all of them?"

Delphine's eyebrows contracted. "To punish my behavior?"
Smiling helplessly, Shay shook her head. "No, though it may feel like that to you." She reached out and brushed her fingertips across the back of Delphine's hand. "You should try all of them to share the experience with me. That way we make memories. Together. So that a week or a year from now, I can say, 'Hey, remember that truffle with pop rocks? You thought it was an abomination.'"

Wariness made Delphine's gaze flinty. "What are pop rocks and why would they make me think that?"

Shay grinned. "Let me find it."

"Can't we start with a recognizable one if you think I'm going to consider this one an abomination?"

"You know," Shay said, searching the box and comparing the pieces against the guide, "you once talked about the things we'll be able to do with genetic modifications. Kind of like . . . we can do it, so why shouldn't we do it? Just think of these wacky flavor combinations as the result of people who looked at chocolate, decided they could . . . experiment with adding ingredients other people might consider unusual, and went ahead and made the possibilities reality. Isn't that similar to what you're proposing?"

"I feel like this is a wildly inappropriate comparison but I need a moment to articulate why."

Delphine picked up the wine glass nearest at hand and sipped. Shay failed to find the particular piece she wanted, the "Sparky," and reached for the other box. Delphine crossed her legs, engaged in deep thought. "In the case of human genetic modifications, the stakes are so high that I should hope that there would be discretion and moderation."

Shay nodded absently. "Because it could be harmful."

"Yes."

"So . . . erasing depression out of genes, yes, but giving a human being a third eye, no? What about trying something in order to try it? To see if you can do it? What's that called? It has a name—"

"Proof of concept," provided Delphine quietly.

"Right. In some cases, you don't know how something is going to turn out until you attempt it and see the results."

"You form hypotheses and models beforehand, but . . . yes," Delphine murmured, elbow on her thigh and wine glass held aloft.

"In that scenario, do you try it?" Shay asked, espying the unadorned and rather innocuous rectangle she sought.

"There are different stances," Delphine said.

"What's your stance?" Shay asked. She considered how to proceed with the truffles. "Do we need a plate?"

Delphine nodded. "And maybe napkins. I'll be right back."

Delphine returned with two small plates and a handful of napkins. Shay pointed at the Sparky truffle. "This one."

"Okay," Delphine said, watching her.
Shay smiled. "You first."

"No," protested Delphine. "Why? I bought these with you in mind. For you."

"I know," Shay said, "but I want to see your reaction first."

"Why? That's so cruel."

Shay giggled. "Okay. Answer my question and I'll try it first."

"What was the question?" Delphine asked in an air of distraction. Perhaps at the impending prospect of the mystery that were pop rocks.

"Would you perform an experiment to prove . . . proof of concept?" The awkwardness of the phrasing exasperated Shay into a grimace. "That doesn't sound right, but you get what I mean."

"Depends on the experiment," Delphine said. "Every experiment has different degrees of risk and considerations. In many cases, experimentation does not begin on people."

"Right. It would probably start with mice or rats." Shay picked up the Sparky truffle. "Do mice and rats have depression that we can write out of them?"

"I'm not an expert in this area," Delphine cautioned, "but we do perform experiments using mice and rats in controlled behavioral and hormonal experiments. We try to observe the effects of anxiety, stress, and so forth caused by external and internal factors. I'm not sure if we have engineered rodents with genes that we believe foster symptoms of depression, but . . . we may be approaching that possibility if we haven't already." Delphine studied Shay. "I can look into it, if you would like to know."

Shay shook her head. "But . . . pushing the boundaries of what's possible is where you'd like your work to go, yeah? Like making science fiction real."

Delphine's demeanor withdrew, circumspect and contemplative. "Yes."

"Technologies that would be used on people."

Delphine nodded.

"Okay, let's say, hypothetically, you have a child and you do some gene review or whatever and you discover that the child will be susceptible to depression—do you cut it out or alter it or whatever the technology will be?"

Delphine raised an eyebrow. "Would you?"

They studied one another.

At last, Shay said, "I don't know."

"Let's change this scenario," Delphine said. "If you had a child suffering from depression, would you take that child to see a psychiatrist or therapist?"

Shay's answer emerged quiet. "Yes."

"And if medication were recommended and prescribed, would you give that child the medication?"

Shay took a deep breath. "Yes."
"Then how is it different to eliminate the root of the problem before it causes a manifestation?"

Shay shook her head. "Because a zygote can't tell me if they're feeling bad? Because I don't know if making that change at that stage will cause other effects?"

Delphine nodded. "If studies and implementation advanced to a point where experts told you that without a doubt this child would develop depression and that it was proven that the technique that they had developed would eliminate that from happening, would you do it?"

Shay sat very quietly for a time. "I don't know."

"But if that child developed cancer and experts told you there were treatments—surgery, chemotherapy, stem cell therapy, gene therapy—that they could use to cure your child—would you act on their recommendations?"

Shay nodded. "Yes."

"You are stumbling on perception," Delphine said gently. "Cancer treatments have become normalized in our society. As have preventative measures like vaccines. You see that type of normalization in acceptance happening today with things like medical marijuana. If you want to see the reverse where our growing understanding fosters a negative perception, you can look at tobacco, where social and governmental forces exert pressure to reduce smoking. In order for something like the use of genetic modification to become accepted, the conversation around the topic needs to be shifted and people need to see the results, the efficacy, the usefulness, the dangers, and the safety of the procedures. Scientific—that is, controlled—research provides the evidence of those points."

Delphine waved a hand. "In time what seemed strange becomes everyday."

"So you're saying that you would alter the genes?" Shay asked.

Delphine took up her glass again. "If I knew it would work?" She sipped and sucked at her lips. "Yes."

They both sunk into quiet. Shay remembered the truffle pinched between her fingers. "Sorry, the truffle's melting a little."

"You can eat the whole thing," Delphine insisted, with eagerness.

"Don't think you're getting out of this," Shay said cheerfully. "I'm so glad you created this opportunity. I'm just going to bite it—is that okay?"

Delphine flashed Shay a look that Shay deliberately chose not to read into. Shay eyeballed the midpoint and sank her teeth delicately into the truffle. The milk chocolate melted in a layer of cloying sweetness across her tongue—followed by the literal sensation of point bursts inside her mouth. Shay clamped her lips tight until the assault slowed and subsided. Shay nodded. "Mmhmm."

Shay held the remaining half up to Delphine. Delphine eyed it with the wariness afforded a horse pill and finally simply opened her mouth. Shay hesitated. Delphine waited. Careful, aware of the decreased proximity between them, Shay tipped the morsel onto Delphine's tongue. Within a second horror widened Delphine's eyes. Delphine covered her mouth with her free hand. The ordeal lasted less than a minute, concluding with a large gulp of wine.

Delphine regained her breath. "You could have warned me!"

"Pop rocks," Shay said, licking at the chocolate residue on her fingertips.
"That was—strange," Delphine managed, distressed, waving her hand at her mouth as if she could fan away the experience.

Smiling, Shay reached for her glass of wine to clear her palate. "I haven't had pop rocks since I was little."

"It was like—" Delphine extended and closed her free hand in pulses. "—small explosions in my mouth."

"That's what pop rocks do," confirmed Shay.

Delphine shook her head. "That was—"

"An abomination?"

"Unpleasant," substituted Delphine. She washed down the experience with wine. "Please, an ordinary one next."

Not bothering to stifle her grin of delight, Shay identified one of the square regional selections, the pattern pressed into the top matching the one in the booklet made from beans grown in Papua New Guinea. Explaining this, Shay offered the first bite to Delphine but her hostess raised a hand in protest and shook her head.

"You first," Delphine said. "So I can see your reaction."

"You can ask for my opinion instead of trying to guess it," Shay said, nibbling off a quarter.

Delphine sat quiet, but her expression revealed a moment's stunned reconsideration. Refocusing on Shay, Delphine asked, "How is it?"

Shay nodded in approval and held out the truffle. Delphine leaned forward and seized a sizable portion between her teeth, alarmingly close to Shay's fingers. The evaluation proceeded in thoughtful silence, with no chewing, just time and enzymes dissolving and dispersing sugar and chocolate to the responsive tastebuds.

Bringing her glass to her lips, Delphine said, "That's much better."

Shay eyed Delphine as they worked on the nugget. "Do you want to talk about your day? You said today was . . ."

"Challenging," Delphine finished when Shay couldn't recall the descriptor. Delphine shrugged. "There's not much to talk about, only that there was a lot of talking."

Shay nodded, offering Delphine the final portion that was hers. "You were in meetings?"

"Something like that," Delphine said around the piece of chocolate. The effect on her speech prompted her to chew a bit before resuming. "There was a lot of discussion and review and questions." She glanced over Shay's shoulder toward the tall windows. "But until a decision is made, there's not much to do."

"A decision?" Shay asked, choosing a chocolate shaped into a long thin cone without bothering to consult the booklet.

"Yes. With our time being limited, we have to commit to a course of action, but deciding on which one is difficult. What is that?"
Shay rolled the bite of the point around in her mouth. "Interesting."

"Interesting how?"

"I can't identify what's creating this taste."

Delphine glowered with doubt but gamely acquiesced without clarification. Surprise lit Delphine's eyes. "Oh. Interesting. What's in it?"

Booklet spread across her lap, Shay announced, "Olive oil made from 'fruity' olives."

Delphine refilled their glasses as Shay determined the next one. "How was your day?"

"Uneventful. A usual day, more or less. Except someone sent me flowers," Shay said, recognizing that Delphine was closing the subject of her work day. Shay plucked out a truffle topped with crystals of what Shay thought was sugar but turned out to be salt. Dark chocolate, caramel, salt, and a buttery richness flooded her mouth. Shay barely tipped back the truffle in time to prevent the caramel from oozing out. "Mmmm. Mmhmm. This one."

Delphine smiled and accepted the other half.

Swallowing and encouraging the caramel off her teeth with wine, Shay pointed out, "You could have just texted me."

Mouth full, Delphine nodded in nonchalant agreement.

"My coworkers are very intrigued," Shay said, imposing a break and taking judicial sips. "One thinks you're an old school romantic."

Delphine's lips stretched into a wide, close-lipped smile.

"If that's what you were aiming for, congratulations."

Delphine shook her head, forehead scrunching as her jaw worked, likely in efforts to dislodge caramel. Settling, she said, "It does not matter to me what she thinks, but what you think."

"You mean if I thought it was romantic?"

"Yes."

Shay smiled. "It was so romantic, it didn't occur to me that the flowers might be for me."

Dissatisfaction drew down Delphine's brow. "That feels like a... what is it called when it's a compliment that sounds like an insult?"

"Backhanded compliment. But it wasn't a backhanded compliment."

"It sounded like a backhanded compliment."

"It genuinely surprised me," Shay said, voice dropping with sincerity. "I feel like I'm learning you all over again. Sometimes I forget it's only been one weekend."

"We've known each other much longer than that," Delphine observed.

"You know what I mean," Shay said softly.
Delphine nodded. "You meant that you didn't expect that from me, for that side to exist."

Shay leaned back into the cushions. Slouched, really. She felt lethargy seeping into her muscles from the fullness of her stomach. Her wine glass was nearly empty. Again.

"Yeah," managed Shay, grasping at the accessible answer with the impending onset of a sugar rush. "I know you're kind and considerate and funny and smart, but . . . you told me those things were adaptations to communal living, that love is an evolutionary trick."

"They are."

Shay laughed, head lolling against the couch.

Delphine's gaze passed leisurely over Shay's face. "Acknowledging and understanding the way our species responded and adapted to the demands of social living doesn't mean the emotions we developed and how we experience them are not real." Solicitude suffused Delphine's regard. "In fact, knowing the biochemical processes makes them more real. We can combat depression in some because we pinpointed the function and importance of hormones like serotonin."

"What's the hormone behind romanticism?"

"Hormones. Serotonin, norepinephrine, and dopamine. And not so much romanticism, but the feeling that we consider being in love."

Shay smiled. "Of course you know that off the top of your head. But does that explain grand gestures?"

"Not exactly. The feeling of being in love might propel people to make romantic gestures, but the actual gestures are defined by socialization and cultural norms. As are concepts like language, polite manners, fashion, literature, religion, government, music—"

"I get it, I get it," Shay giggled.

"But you don't 'get' that I might be capable of making romantic gestures." To Delphine's credit, any accusatory note was buried beyond detection.

"Correct," Shay said. "The evidence I had didn't suggest it."

Delphine paused, features briefly bereft of emotion, then eased into a smile. "Yes. I see."

"But you're building a whole new portfolio," Shay said.

Delphine chuckled. "Am I?"

"But I already liked the you I knew."

"As your friend," Delphine supplied.

"As a person," corrected Shay. Her thoughts felt slippery. Like the fish that would dangle on the hook when reeled out of the water by her father's fishing rod. "You don't need to become someone different for me to think of you in different terms."

Delphine smiled. "I'm not becoming anything, Shay. We're uncovering other sides."

"We?"
"You and I."

Shay smiled. "Okay. You didn't send flowers to your boyfriends?"

"Once I brought over flowers to brighten an ex's apartment. He liked them."

"Can I ask a question?"

"Of course," Delphine said.

"The photographs of Paris on the shelves. That is Paris, right?"

"Yes."

"Are they personal photos? Like, did you take them?"

Delphine chuckled. "I could have, if I were—older. Those were pictures that my father and mother took of Paris, when they were young and settling into the city."

Shay liked the way Delphine said Paris, the manner the French appeared abruptly among her English. "They weren't from the city?"

"My father was not, but my mother was. He went there to study. He had a class with my maternal uncle and that's how he met my mother. Actually, I think many of the photos were taken by her. I took the ones I liked."

"I like them, too," Shay said, shifting to pull her legs up onto the couch but stopping mid-motion. "Do you mind if I put my feet on the couch? I'll take my shoes off."

Delphine smiled. "Go ahead."

Not bothering to sit up, Shay engaged in a one-handed struggle with her boots. First the right crashed to the floor, then the left. Delphine bore witness with amusement.

"I think I had too much wine," Shay announced as she curled into a stone-limbed lump. "I shouldn't have trusted you." She consulted her sluggish cognitive processes. "Or maybe that's the sugar rushing to my head. But I really liked that last truffle. And I'm curious about the one with balsamic vinegar."

Delphine patted Shay's thigh. "I didn't think a glass of wine would be too much. Let me get you a glass of water."

"It was more than one glass of red wine," clarified Shay as Delphine got up, "and like... two or three glasses of white wine first."

Delphine returned with a tall glass of water. Shay exchanged her wine glass for the water and gulped down nearly half the volume. Her empty wine glass was relegated to the coffee table by Delphine's hand, along with the boxes of truffles. Resettling on the couch, Delphine asked, "Do you want to lie down?"

Shay summoned a weary, contrite smile. "Sorry."

"Nothing to be sorry about." Delphine patted the top of her thigh in invitation. "Come. Lie down."

Shay eyed the prospective pillow. Delphine smiled. Any small adjustment sent Shay's sense of balance teetering back and forth. She wanted to stay still. She wanted to lie down. She didn't know
Shay braced her weight on the couch upon her forearm and lowered herself by degrees, until her head touched the soft cushion of Delphine's thigh. The gap was too wide. The angle of the distance cramped Shay's neck. Shay paused, letting her balance calibrate, then scooted closer so that Delphine's thigh curved snug against her shoulder and neck. Delphine sat patiently until Shay stilled.

"Is that okay?" Shay asked.

The weight of Delphine's hand came to rest on Shay's shoulder. "That's fine."

Tension stiffened Shay's muscles. "I don't want to cut off circulation to your leg."

Delphine chuckled. "You're fine. Shall I turn on the television?"

"If you want to," Shay murmured.

"Excuse me," Delphine murmured as she leaned forward to fetch the remote control on the coffee table. The television took a few moments to power on and came to brightly colored, babbling life with a local news story. Delphine was quick to lower the volume.

"Do you watch the news?" mumbled Shay.

"Sometimes."

"In the morning or at night?"

"Mostly in the morning as I'm getting ready. I let my subconscious absorb the local talk."

"What?" Shay asked, brain unable to process the last sentence, knowing Delphine didn't mean the English language.

"To acclimate to Toronto."

Shay smiled in understanding. "Has it worked?"

"Not really. It turns out paying attention helps in the retention of the names of people and places."

Shay giggled. "But you've been in Toronto a while now. Some names should have stuck."

"Tim Hortons," Delphine said.

Shay turned her face into Delphine's thigh to stifle her laughter. "Yeah—yeah. That would stick."

As Shay calmed down, Delphine asked, "What should we watch?"

"Doesn't matter." Delphine's thumb stroked across Shay's shoulder. "Tell me more about your parents? What did your father study when he went to Paris?"

The television transitioned through a succession of channels, images, and sounds. "Economics and finance. He is a banker. He did not wish to follow in his father's footsteps."

"Your grandfather? What did he do?"

"He was a doctor."

Shay chuckled. "So you followed your grandfather."
"Not by his design or suggestion. But yes. My grandfather was a doctor in the country. It was always fun to visit him because everyone knew him—or it felt that way."

"And your mom?"

"My mother did many things."

"She worked?"

"Yes. She did not have to, but I think she needed to. She is, I think you would say, restless. Even today. Friends and acquaintances are always pulling her into participating in this or that. She is a very effective organizer. Lately she has been putting together fundraising events. My father says it keeps her young."

"That's good."

Delphine hummed in a noncommittal response.

"They're still in Paris? Do you miss them?" Shay asked.

"They are. We maintain contact. My mother calls regularly. You can imagine that she always has something to share."

Shay smiled. Delphine had yet to settle on a channel.

"I know a little about your brothers," Delphine said, "but not about your parents."

"My parents divorced when I was six. My brothers and I stayed in Canada with my mom and my dad returned to the United States."

The television stopped its frenetic cuts and stayed on a commercial. "Returned?"

"My father's an American citizen. He was in the Army."

"Your father—"

"He's not in the Army now," Shay explained. "My mom is a nurse."

"Was your mother a nurse for the Canadian forces? Did she and your father meet on a base?"

"No, she worked in a clinic at the time, I think," Shay said. "The story goes that he either fractured a toe or broke it—doing what, I don't know, but my guess it was inadvisable. Anyway, he wound up in urgent care where they couldn't do anything for him but he joked and flirted with the pretty nurse."

Delphine chuckled. The commercials ended and hockey dominated the screen. They watched the teams trade control of the puck until Delphine said, "Did you say that there was a truffle with balsamic vinegar?"

"Yeah."

One of the players took a slap shot that veered wide. "Balsamic vinegar—it's used on salads and on bread?"

"That's how I've had it."

Two opposing players slammed up against the sideboards. "Why are you curious about that?"
"Exactly for the reason you sound doubtful," Shay said. 

Delphine loosed a soft harrumph. 

"I don't have much interest in hockey," Shay confessed. 

"Neither do I." Delphine juggled the remote control in her off hand and changed the input. 

"That's all you wanted to know?" Shay asked softly. 

"About your parents? I welcome knowing more," Delphine said, "but I don't need to know more." 

Shay scoffed. "How can we be so different?"

"You say that like we're related or were raised by the same people and thus should be similar," admonished Delphine. "Our lives have been very different. Of course we're different."

Shay twisted to glance up at Delphine. "But this is like an essential personality difference—the fact that your curiosity can just end. Right there."

Delphine's brow contracted. "You stopped asking questions as well." Heightened confusion narrowed Delphine's eyes. "To be honest, you call yourself nosy but I think the number of questions you ask is usually moderate."

Shay flopped fully back onto her side, away from face-to-face engagement, to blunt her exasperation. "Because I hold back my hundred questions to keep from freaking you out with how many questions I want to ask."

Silence emanated from the space Delphine occupied behind Shay. At last Delphine said, "I want to know what you want to tell me. What you're comfortable with me knowing."

"That," Shay sighed, "is entirely admirable."

"That's not how you feel?"

"No. I feel nosy."

"What is that you want to know?"

"At minimum in any given moment?" Shay posed. "Everything."

"Everything," Delphine echoed with a little chuckle. "What does that mean?"

"Everything," Shay said. "I want to know what it was like growing up in Paris. I want to know if you were close with your mom and dad. I want to know who your boyfriends were and what they were like. I want to know what you did at work today. I want to know what's in your refrigerator. I want to know what's behind doors one and two. Everything."

"Do you really want to know about my exes?" wondered Delphine. "Isn't that a sensitive topic to discuss with—"

Delphine didn't complete the sentence. But Shay took up the thread. "Yeah, see, it's easier to not make things weird by not asking."

"Would it be weird?" mused Delphine.
Shay glanced up at her. "I don't know, would it be?"

"Would you feel weird talking about your exes with me?" Delphine asked.

"Would you feel weird hearing about them?"

Delphine drifted away in thought. After a time, she said, "I'm not sure."

"Yeah," huffed Shay. She realized the television displayed a DVD menu. "You own *Cosmos* on DVD?"

"Yes. Both series."

Shay giggled. "That's . . . that's adorable. You keep it ready to go in the DVD player?"

"Not 'ready to go,'" Delphine said, "but it was the last DVD I put on. It is a good study companion—though I'm not really studying these days. But if I am doing work at home, it is sometimes nice to have background noise. Like news. Music. *Cosmos*. Have you seen it?"

"No," admitted Shay.

"Okay," Delphine said, hitting play.

Shay sighed.

"Do you want to try that truffle?" Delphine queried.

"Do *you* want to try that truffle?"

"If you want to."

"Really?" Shay asked.

"Yes, really," Delphine said mildly.

"No," Shay exhaled, "there's no need to force you to do something you don't want to."

"I just said I'm willing," Delphine pointed out. "I'm volunteering."

"Against your desires."

Delphine gave Shay's shoulder a light squeeze. "You are not listening and making presumptions. I have my curiosity as well."

Shay giggled. "Against your better judgment?"

"Against better judgment is humans attempting flight. Or plunging into the crushing depths of the sea."

Shay hesitated. "Both of which we succeeded at. More or less. Right?"

"Yes."

"So you're suggesting that maybe the balsamic vinegar truffle is an achievement of human ingenuity?"

"I can't know or judge unless I try," Delphine said. "Someone considered it a success to put it on the
"Now it sounds like you want to try it but you can't admit it and you're trying to use me as the excuse."

"You're not the excuse, you're the reason," Delphine declared plainly. "I'm curious as to why you're curious."

No pithy riposte fired through Shay's compromised faculties. "Because it's balsamic vinegar and chocolate."

"Right."

Shay smiled. "Right. But I don't want to try it right now, thank you."

"Okay."

Neil deGrasse Tyson escorted them through the Milky Way Galaxy in a special effects chrome spaceship or something. Shay had missed the explanation—for the vehicle and the tour. Her eyelids drooped. Tyson's narration receded into a lulling murmur.

The weight of Delphine's hand vacated Shay's shoulder.

The subsequent touch upon Shay's hair was light and uncertain.

Shay opened her eyes and held still.

The first pass of Delphine's fingers was no more than a brush across Shay's hair. The second, alighting breaths later, parted strands.

Shay kept her respiration even.

Delphine swept Shay's hair off her cheek, guided it behind her ear, and lifted it off her neck, Shay's nerves attuned to the trail across her skull. The pressure of Delphine's touch gained confidence, easing into twirling Shay's hair like gathered pasta, dragging in long strokes across Shay's scalp, careful and gentle in unknotting tangles and snags, massaging familiarity and comfort into Shay's synapses, trickling ease and relaxation throughout the summary of Shay's muscles.

Shay took a deep breath and closed her eyes.


"Mmhmm," hummed Shay in agreement.

"It wasn't awkward," proposed Delphine.

"But it was calculated sometimes," responded Shay in a mutter slow and sleepy.

Delphine's touch faltered for a moment. Then floated a soft exhalation. "Yes."

A second later, adrift, Shay said, "Brave New World."

"Yes?"

"The novel. By Aldous Huxley. That's where I . . . heard of soma. The designer drug. For designer
people."

"In a science fiction dystopia," Delphine said.

"Mmhm. Against better judgment."

Shay wasn't sure she spoke her answer. Or what it meant. Pressure sat on her eyelids. Sounds faded away. Her thoughts sank down. Down. Down.

The gentle jingle dangled in Shay's ear like a hook baiting a fish and snatched her out of the waters of unconsciousness. Noises wiggled into Shay's eardrums. Her mind struggled to separate them. Music and words and ringtone. Shay shifted in disorientation and seized up at a spike of stiffness in her neck.

"I'm sorry," Delphine said, startling Shay anew, "that's my phone. I left it on the counter."

Shay cracked open her eyes and immediately covered them against the prick of light. "I fell asleep?" She exhaled in a gust. "I'm sorry." The ringing continued. Shay tried to sit up. "You should get that."

A hand planted on Shay's back and eased her upright. "It's okay."

Delphine's hand and presence retreated when she stood up. Shay put her face in her hands, urging her mind to shake off the grogginess.

The ringing stopped.

Shay risked the glare of the light and, squinting, glanced over her shoulder. Delphine stood considering her phone.

"Did you miss the call?" Shay asked. "Do you need to call them back?"

"No matter," Delphine murmured.

It occurred to Shay to wonder how long she'd been asleep. "What time is it? It must be late. Are you sure it's not important? Was it a call from France?"

Delphine chuckled softly. "There is only a difference of six hours between here and Paris. It is almost, um, eleven."

"Here?" Shay said, lagging.

Delphine put her phone aside. "Yes. Here."

"Ah, jeez, I should go," gasped Shay. She'd stayed too long. She'd kept Delphine up late.

"You're welcome to stay," Delphine said. "Don't worry about the call. I think it was a wrong number. I've never seen it before." Delphine stood by the end of the couch. "If you're thirsty, your glass of water is on the table."

Shay's bladder came to attention at the mention of water. "Actually, can I use your bathroom?"

Delphine smiled. "Of course."

The door Delphine indicated led to a compartment crowded with a toilet and sink. Shay's mind idly
clocked Delphine's apartment at what was likely two bedrooms, one and a half baths. In the city. The thought summoned a small hapless laugh that revived Shay.

When Shay stepped out she found Delphine in the kitchen putting away the leftover bouillabaisse.

"Do you need any help?" asked Shay.

Delphine whirled. "No, I'm almost done. Take the truffles."

"The truffles," Shay mumbled to herself, covering her eyes. "I'm sorry. You bought all those truffles and I fell asleep and—"

"Shay," Delphine interrupted mildly, "if you are concerned about the truffles, then, like I said, you can come over tomorrow and we can have more. Or you can take them home. And maybe it will be that we'll eat the truffles there." Delphine smiled. "I was told they should be consumed within a week. There's still time."

Shay scanned the unfamiliar apartment. "I just—feel like a bad guest."

"The last thing I want is for you to feel like a guest," declared Delphine, conveying the emptied pot to the sink. "I want you to feel comfortable here. The way you've made me feel."

Shay exhaled into a smile. She crossed to the coffee table, finished her glass of water, and gingerly scooped up both wine glasses in one hand by the stems. Toting the glasses to the kitchen, she said, "It's going to take more than one visit to feel comfortable."

Delphine reached out for the wine glasses, lips curled. "I don't object to that proposal." As her fingers brushed Shay's, Delphine's gaze flickered to Shay's mouth. Anticipation played upon Shay's lips, but Delphine relieved Shay of the glasses and carried them to the sink. Befuddlement paralyzed Shay a second. Had she misread the moment? Or had Delphine forsaken her on the spot?

Sucking on her lips, Shay followed with her water glass. Setting it down in the sink brushed her arm against Delphine's.

A glance into Delphine's face revealed a smile.

Shay huffed under her breath, a laugh of sorts, at herself. "How about I take half the truffles or so?"

"Take as many as you want," Delphine allowed with lenient nonchalance.

"I meant in case—" Shay paused as Delphine turned to her with a smile. "You know what I meant."

Delphine's smile showed no hint of abating. "Yes."

"Okay." Shay turned and sought her boots. They went back on her feet. The boxes of truffles journeyed in her hands to the foyer where Shay set them down on the side table by the snake plant. Delphine met her at the closet, pulling out Shay's coat and scarf and holding the garment aloft. When Shay slipped her arms into the sleeves, Delphine tucked the coat snugly over Shay's shoulders and pulled the ends overlapping across Shay's chest. In the hold of the brief quasi-embrace, Shay smiled.

Turning around, Shay said, "Thank you for dinner. It was amazing."

Delphine looped Shay's scarf around her neck. "Perhaps not amazing enough."

Shay smirked. "It was more than amazing. Take my word for it."
"They say actions speak louder than words," Delphine mused.

"People do say that," Shay agreed mildly. "Should I take the big box or the small box?"

A stunned second saw surprise in Delphine's eyes, but soon followed the slow stretch of Delphine's lips into a deep smile. "Whichever you want."

"I'll take the small one," Shay said. "It'll be easier to carry. But I think the balsamic vinegar truffle is in the big box."

"Oh no," intoned Delphine, deadpan.

Shay grinned. "Let's try it."

"Help yourself," Delphine encouraged Shay, for all intents leaving herself out of the equation.

Shay pouted but scoured through the truffles for the balsamic vinegar threat. When she found it, Shay held it up with triumph to Delphine's studied and bemused distance. With Delphine watching, Shay took a bite.

"How is it?" Delphine queried.

Shay contemplated the flavors and her answer, then stepped close, reached up with her free hand, and guided Delphine down to meet her lips. With the truffle spread upon her tongue, Shay slipped past Delphine's parted lips and let Delphine have a taste, while taking—or maybe receiving—one of her own as Delphine leapt beyond startled to engaged, hands grasping at Shay's hip and waist to pull her flush.

The sensation of Delphine's fingers grazing the bottom of her ribcage incited a small gasp in Shay that parted them.

Delphine's eyes, the subtle colors of which had long fascinated Shay, shimmered with heat and intent. Shay held up the other half of the truffle. Without breaking eye contact, Delphine took the piece of chocolate into her mouth—and sucked—hard, then lingering—on the tips of Shay's fingers.

*Stay,* entreated Delphine's gaze as Shay brushed Delphine's lips.

The ringtone interjected.

They stood locked for a second longer in the spell until Shay exhaled. Unevenly.

"Shouldn't you check that?"

Expression settling into hard lines, Delphine released Shay and removed her phone from her pocket. Assessment of the screen collapsed Delphine's brow with worry. Turning away a bit from Shay, Delphine answered, "Hello. Delphine speaking. Is something wrong?" Delphine listened. Shay licked the remainder of chocolate off her fingers. "I see." Delphine bowed her head, listening with increasing concentration. "Alright. Let's discuss this tomorrow. In person." Delphine swiped at her lips. "Yes. Well. If this is the only way—" She shook her head. "Tomorrow. What is it that they say? Sleep on it? Yes, sleep on it. Okay. Bye."

Delphine hung up. The shift in mood permeated the lines of her body, all thrumming tension and disquiet. Delphine turned to Shay with apology in her eyes. Shay touched Delphine's shoulder, her arm, unsure what emotion checked the roiling of her own blood—disappointment or worry or relief.
"I should go," Shay said. "We both have work tomorrow."

Delphine hesitated. In her gaze, beneath the cloud of distraction and preoccupation, still lurked the request: Stay. But it lacked the impact of its prior conviction. It looked conflicted. Delphine looked conflicted. "That's true."

Shay leaned up to brush Delphine's lips with a tender kiss. "Tonight was wonderful. Thank you."

Delphine reached up and tucked Shay's hair behind her ear. "Convince me and return soon."

Shay smiled. "We can't let the truffles go to waste."

"That's right."

Delphine walked Shay to the door and, as they stood in the doorway, leaned down and pressed a kiss to Shay's forehead. "I forgot to tell you I like the nail polish."

Shay laughed. After work she'd painted her nails the off-white cream to fend off and calm nervous anticipation—and done an awful job of the polishing. "Yeah, at least the color's nice."

"All of you is nice," Delphine said, brushing back Shay's hair with both hands. She cradled Shay's face and for a moment Shay was unsure if Delphine would let her go, if she herself would walk away.

But they wished each other good night, Delphine thanked Shay for coming, and, for the first time in their relationship, Delphine lingered in place and Shay departed from a door that closed behind her.
Chapter 42

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Alone in her apartment, Delphine struggled to sleep, mind awhirl, until, exhausted, she slipped between conscious and unconscious streams of anxieties. Her thoughts toured two continents of worries vying in landscapes of the distressing, threatening to collide and conflate in an escalating competition for consideration.

Cosima and Sarah had moved forward with Marion Bowles. That much Cosima managed to disclose in her call because that much Delphine deemed sufficient to hear in the blindside of the moment.

What with Shay present. In Delphine's home. Caught in a tug-of-war. Delphine sensed the push and pull. In the way Shay slipped into the familiarity of their back and forth, the implicitly licensed exchange of giving and receiving, the unspoken but coordinated rules that underpinned their banter and interaction—only to pivot and retreat, shy and reluctant, reminded that the currents had carried them into waters uncharted. That somewhere unseen ripped an undertow prepared to capitalize on any lapse in vigilance.

Like how Delphine had let the DYAD and Project Leda slip from her mind over the course of the evening and was thrust, without preparation or defense, reeling up to the line Cosima had chalked onto the battlegrounds. A demarcation without designation—a finish or a start—that was Delphine's prerogative to define. And Delphine wasn't ready. Not for the decision. Not for what the decision would entail.

And what would the evening have entailed if Delphine had spoken aloud? What if, what if, what if she had entreated—"Stay"—and how would Shay have responded considering there'd been a—blip, that separation, when Shay had gasped into Delphine's mouth and pulled away? What would it have meant for Shay to remain? And for the first time—in the deepening twilight hours—thoughts fraying like braided twine—Delphine examined the possibilities—what might have proceeded—what she might have done—what she would have wanted—what did she want to do?

Not to have to speak to Marion Bowles, tomorrow or the day after or whenever the audience was bound to occur, and not to have to dally in conspiratorial office politics with her life and the lives of others as gambling chips in the ante, and not to lose compounding minutes of sleep with every restless breath—

—remembering the feel of Shay's hands moving over sore and aching muscles with surety and confidence, tender and questing, but firm and resolute in purpose, and now left to wonder if it would be different, if Shay's touch would be different, would Delphine feel the difference? And how, in what way? Especially when in all unfairness, Shay had the advantage, knew the textures of Delphine's skin and the blueprint of the musculature beneath, the spots more sensitive and yielding—

—that, like the rest of Delphine, would be exhausted at the outset of the week given the night's scant rest, alertness and judgment diminished—her mind bound to drift to irrelevant distractions, like the series of texts spooled out in her mind that Delphine could not—would not—send in the dark of night, about how resentment lodged beneath her ribs at being left behind, that it was more difficult to remain than to go, how the convenience of being home provided no antidote via the business of travel to obscure the disappointment of separation—when all her concentration would be required to plot the picture of Marion Bowles's intentions.
As Delphine's intentions would have led her to kiss Shay, again, to diminish that lingering tartness of the harebrained balsamic vinegar truffle on her tongue, and again, until the taste was obliterated and the essence remaining to be plumbed comprised only Shay, nerves-to-nerves, flesh-to-flesh, unraveling beneath Delphine's hands on their journey to learn Shay like Shay had learned her, through touch and exploration, impatient to achieve parity—and what would that feel like, to gain access to Shay's body, her permission, her acceptance, her reception—what would Delphine encounter—when assessments at a remove suggested a slightness of form, a refraction of the sense of fragility that haunted Delphine's projections of how much she could ask and want of Shay and grasp in any moment—or would there be revealed a constitution and steadiness that would anchor Delphine, them, in the midst of the uncertain and unknown, whether the tumble of their uncalculated trajectory tipped them careening toward the doubts of a dark abyss or revelations illuminated as in the light of—

Dawn.

Reaching through the curtains.

Delphine covered her face.

* *

There was no readily comprehensible reason a fruitless night propelled Delphine, again, into the private—hidden—sequestered—care unit that cocooned Jennifer Fitzsimmons within the DYAD Institute. Delphine did not come because the visit was overdue, though it was. It was not for the solitude, which was relative in the sterilized space and better fostered in her own empty apartment. Maybe it was a desire to be nowhere and yet to exist nowhere was not an option—but for in this room, where few would look for Delphine, where Jennifer existed but didn't, occupying a physical space in the somewhere but nowhere to be encountered. Perhaps Delphine came here to commune. Perhaps she came to be reminded that she had yet to find a way to coax Jennifer back.

In the low fluorescent glow such ephemeral thoughts took on substance and the semblance of sense. They felt valid. They girded Delphine's unmoored torpor.

The door swung inward.

The movement yanked Delphine's listless attention. She expected a nurse. Marion Bowles stepped inside.

Delphine gripped the armrests of the visitor's chair. Perhaps to propel herself to her feet. Perhaps to anchor her scattered senses. Delphine achieved neither in the second Dr. Bowles paused at the sight of her. Considering.

"How did you find me?" Delphine said before higher functions and better judgment deterred her mouth.

Dr. Bowles stood in still-life composure. Hints of curl gathered at the corners of her mouth the way thunderheads attained height. "There are a number of available avenues. I could have consulted the security guards as to whether they'd seen you. Or asked to see pertinent security footage following your arrival. Or reviewed the access logs of likely security points. Any of which would have invariably led me here." Dr. Bowles closed the door. "But none of which I availed myself."

"You knew I was here?" Delphine asked. Did Marion Bowles know her so well? Was Delphine so easy to read?
"No," Dr. Bowles said and elaborated no further.

Stunned, bewildered, operating at a delay, Delphine grasped at her stores of wit and dignity and gathered herself to rise. "Seeing as you are here—"

"Rather early, yes," Dr. Bowles said in a brusque conclusion to Delphine's overture. Delphine froze midway to her feet. Dr. Bowles paid her no need and stepped to the end of the bed to take up Jennifer's chart. "You look like you could use coffee."

"I am—"

Dr. Bowles directed a sharp glance at Delphine that pushed Delphine back into her seat.

"Yes. I . . . could," allowed Delphine.

Dr. Bowles returned to a perusal of the chart. "I've heard say that the coffee served in the cafeteria is made with the finest Arabica beans, but I find there's something . . . quaint about mingling in a Tim Hortons. Something about the atmosphere. Something almost cultural."

"I have become familiar with Tim Hortons," Delphine said with measured consideration.

Dr. Bowles nodded. "If nothing else it can be novel to see different faces, to give kismet an opportunity to drum up chance encounters."

Delphine paused. "That sounds like . . . it could add excitement to caffeinating."

"It could," Dr. Bowles agreed mildly. "I'm sorry to disrupt your visit, but could I have a moment with Ms. Fitzsimmons?"

"Of course," Delphine said, attaining her feet at last.

Dr. Bowles nodded with nary an acknowledge of Delphine's departure.

Early morning winter temperature jolted Delphine's thoughts into alertness. The walk to Tim Hortons was brisk, bracing, too long by every block, and made Delphine grateful to have a hot cup to hold in her hands. Delphine claimed the same vacant table she had Monday. The deja vu compounded at the sight of the familiar student conducting concentrated composition and frazzled study. The tableau lacked only Cosima.

Delphine's attention fixated on the motions of the student. The highlighter clutched and drawn across text. The gaze bouncing over handwritten notes. The stone-faced, furrow-browed, frowning, pen-chewing attention on the screen. Delphine tried to gauge his age. Upon inspection, he didn't appear very young but for his apparel. Occasionally he glanced around the cafe. At one point he made eye contact with Delphine.

The moment introduced the notion in Delphine's mind. Was he a student? Just a student? Could he be—

"Excuse me, miss," said a man standing at Delphine's side, "do you mind if I join you?"

Delphine turned, spinning thoughts derailed, and stared up with dull sluggishness at the broad-shouldered figure in the well-cut suit. It took a second. Partly because the height differential of their relative positions required Delphine to scrutinize from an awkward angle.

The face was familiar.
Marion Bowles's driver.

One of them. The one who had conveyed Delphine to the restaurant that first rendezvous.

Eric.

"Miss?"

"Yes," Delphine managed abruptly, gesturing to the vacant chair opposite her.

Eric smiled, a tentative expression, and lowered his impressive frame into the seat. The coffee cup looked like a size smaller in his grip.

Delphine watched him. He gazed back at her, facial features neutral, bordering on blank, yet somehow alert around the eyes.

"It's a good day for it, eh?" he said at last.

"Yes," Delphine said simply, though for what it was a good day was beyond the ability of Delphine's ken to discern.

"Would you like to go for a ride, then?" he asked.

Delphine felt slow but the speed of her response was not. "Yes."

Eric smiled. The encore brought out a more relaxed performance.

For a heartbeat Delphine was unsure if she'd agreed to an actual proposition. The uncertainty ballooned when Eric led her to a sedan across the street and opened the front passenger door. The back seat was empty.

Delphine turned to Eric. "Where are we going?"

Eric smiled. This latest rendition was more strained—and comprised the entirety of the answer Delphine received.

Eric waited. Delphine stood undecided. A glance back discovered the student through the cafe window, immersed in his materials, oblivious to her dilemma.

Delphine slipped into the car. A part of her was too tired and resigned to care about where or for what purpose Eric would whisk her away. At least it would be a cozy journey given Eric's immediate attendance to the temperature settings. He drove them weaving and meandering through the streets. Delphine attempted to track their path but in time her sense of direction, along with recognition of the passing areas, dissipated. Eric navigated without a hint of perturbation, taking the two of them, by Delphine's guess, farther and farther away from the DYAD Institute.

Buildings began to show their age and took on an industrial cast. Proprietors evidently had given up the struggle against the ravages of the elements and forsaken scourings and applications of fresh paint. Grime caked windows. Stains stretched tendrils down facades like running mascara. But no one building had reason to be self-conscious—they all resembled one another.

A glimpse of water at last prompted Delphine to ask, "Where are we?"

"Soon, Dr. Cormier," Eric said. An assurance or a threat, who could say. Not Delphine.

Eric pulled up to a gate. A man, dressed in service work coveralls that were noticeably clean, sturdy
boots, and a cap pulled low, poked his head around the left pillar. Eric raised a hand in salute. The gate retracted. Eric rolled them past the threshold and onto a lot that contained a contingent of SUVs and a sedan, beside which Eric parked. He exited the car and briskly came around to the other side to open the door for Delphine.

"We're here, Dr. Cormier," Eric announced. No smile.

The driver of the other sedan, similarly attired to Eric, likewise stepped out and opened the back door of his vehicle. Inside sat Marion Bowles.

Spy movie tropes flashed through Delphine's mind. The world of James Bond seemed less cloak and dagger than the hoops and diversions Marion Bowles devised.

Dr. Bowles eyed Delphine as Delphine climbed into the car. "Didn't drink much of the coffee?"

"I wasn't very thirsty," Delphine said.

Dr. Bowles smiled. "I don't blame you."

"Where are we?" Delphine asked.

With her chin Dr. Bowles indicated the peeling warehouse they faced. "Cosima's personal laboratory. As per her request and as best a match to her criteria that we could manage given the restrictions. But it's isolated. Protected. State of the art."

Delphine surveyed the building. "I assume the outside will not reflect the inside."

"Would you like to take a look?"

Dr. Bowles opened the car door and stepped out. Delphine followed suit on her side. The driver Delphine didn't recognize tailed them into the building while Eric remained with the vehicles. To Delphine's mild surprise, the entrance to the warehouse was simply a heavy door that the driver opened and held for them. Delphine expected perhaps an open space, not the poorly lit anteroom in which standing at attention before a metal foldout chair was another suited man. He nodded at Dr. Bowles. Dr. Bowles continued past in the indifferent air of authority. Their party passed through a set of doors into a dim hallway that ended in another door that possessed a shine the others didn't. It was sealed. Into the adjacent keypad Dr. Bowles entered a code and pressed her thumb to the scanner pad. The lock released with a hiss.

When the door opened Delphine flinched and squinted against a searing expanse of white that assaulted her vision. Dr. Bowles proceeded undaunted. Delphine hurried to keep pace. Their escort remained behind as the door closed and locked. Sterility emanated from the walls, as if the stark white was the product of bleach, an impression amplified by the smell of cleansers tickling Delphine's nostrils. Dr. Bowles took them through another set of doors, these swinging, and the space opened up, doors lining both sides that led to unseen compartments.

Dr. Bowles looked to Delphine and nodded permission.

The first door Delphine tried led to a room that resembled the laboratory of the Old Wing. The one across the hall housed centrifuges, incubators, and analysis equipment. The one adjacent to that held refrigerators. The fourth door led to an operating theater. The fifth held lockers. Delphine ventured inside to find showers and bathroom facilities. There were more doors. None of the rooms had windows.
Delphine backed out warily and turned to Dr. Bowles. "This is a complete facility."

Dr. Bowles nodded nonchalantly. "There's also a break room. And beds."

"This was not outfitted yesterday—or even last week. You had this ready."

"So to speak," Dr. Bowles allowed. "It will serve Cosima's purposes."

"Is this a DYAD property?" Delphine wondered.

Dr. Bowles shook her head. "It belongs to Topside, in a manner of speaking, held through a series of opaque parties and shell companies."

"And it's not known to DYAD associates?" Delphine pressed.

Dr. Bowles smiled. It was not gentle or nice. "Dr. Cormier, please. I've moved through this realm quite a bit longer than you have."

Delphine presumed Marion Bowles was not referring to her age.

Delphine licked her lips. "You just happened to have this property, this laboratory, in the city, ready to go?"

"Dr. Cormier," Dr. Bowles said levelly, "ask yourself right now which questions you genuinely desire answered."

Delphine took a steadying breath. She did not pace. She did not fidget. She reached for an image of stillness. Delphine thought for a moment of Shay.

"Has Cosima seen this?" Delphine asked.

"No. As you noted, we are still in the city, within some proximity to the DYAD Institute. If Cosima and Sarah take issue, we can move the operation to any number of sites. I don't find the notion remiss. The need for caution can never be overstated in our affairs. But—" Dr. Bowles spread her hands. "—I took into account that Sarah seemed keen on the idea that Cosima be within reach." A smile flirted with Dr. Bowles's lips. "Sarah has a notable big sister instinct toward the others—I find it curious. As far as I can tell, her brother doesn't receive the same degree of attention. Doesn't that make you wonder?"

"Brother?" Delphine wondered.

Speculation checked the light of amusement in Dr. Bowles's eyes. After a moment, Dr. Bowles said, "Aldous raised you so high, so fast—and then held you back."

Delphine straightened up. Her mind rallied. Now was the time to pay attention. "Why are you showing me the facility before Cosima?"

"The opportunity arose. Not all occurrences are planned." Dr. Bowles took a step toward Delphine. "I think you understand this. Very well. Right now you are standing here with me, in a secret facility furnished at the request of a secret subject of a secret science experiment, and after this you will have to make a decision. You could, of course, upon the conclusion of this meeting go immediately to Aldous Leekie and reveal to him everything you've seen and heard." Dr. Bowles's dipped her head to the side in a gesture that felt like a shrug. "If Aldous weren't fixated on Sarah Manning, I would have surmised he sent you here to do exactly that—but Aldous has a way of losing sight. He's so focused on Sarah Manning, on the idea of bringing her in willingly no less, that he doesn't see how
far the sheep beneath his nose has wandered off."

Tension coalesced in Delphine’s jaw. "Are you referring to Cosima or me?"

Dr. Bowles lifted an eyebrow. "Does it apply to you?"

Delphine squared her shoulders. "What happened to Cosima’s previous monitor?"

"What I suppose had to happen," Dr. Bowles said, frank. "That decision was not in my hands. Overseeing the details and minutiae of the Leda monitor program has long been Aldous’s domain."

"And Greg, Jennifer’s monitor? You don’t know what happened to him?"

"Whatever Aldous determined was appropriate."

Delphine repelled a frown. "What if Jennifer woke tomorrow? What if she asked after Greg? What if she got well and wanted to return to her life and tried to seek him out?"

Dr. Bowles gave a slight shake of her head. "In the event that we could improve Jennifer’s condition to that degree, would that be your concern?"

Delphine kept her respiration even. "What am I looking at in this moment?"

"What do you mean?"

"My options."

"Be clearer, Dr. Cormier," Dr. Bowles said, curt, her patience sounding stretched.

"What happens to me now?" Delphine asked.

Dr. Bowles surveyed Delphine coolly. "What do you want to happen to you?"

Delphine had no ready answer.

Dr. Bowles nodded to punctuate Delphine’s silence. "Aldous is capable of painting alluring pictures." Dr. Bowles took a measured step that became another until she was turning a leisurely pace around the hall, heels striking clicks off the floor. "Prospects of opened doors, limitless resources, unimaginable reach, science perched so far on the leading edge as to lack denoted disciplines. He possesses charisma. He wouldn’t be permitted to hold his position otherwise. I don’t have trouble imagining how he sweeps up young talent into his vision. Yet . . . when I look at you, I find it hard to believe the intent of conquest traveled in only one direction. I imagine you had hopes when you threw in your lot with Aldous. Ambitions. Plans. Goals." Dr. Bowles pressed the palms of her hands together. "I don’t fault you. Or him. As a messenger, Aldous has enough flair to attract the bedazzled and daring, and he has the instinct to ferret out talent, particularly in the photogenic, if not always the sense for how to foster potential. As Aldous initiated you into DYAD’s deeper mysteries, I was intrigued to see where you might go, what path you would forge for yourself under his auspices. And now you’ve peeked behind the curtain. You know there exists far more than the influence of Aldous, than the DYAD, for all its globe-spanning reach. Much more. How much more you wish to see of that is up to you."

"How would that opportunity become available to me?" Delphine asked, forcing words beyond her dry throat.

"Through me," Dr. Bowles said, matter-of-fact.
This was not the course of conversation Delphine expected. Delphine swallowed. "My focus is on the present and the cure for the Leda subjects. To dwell on what comes afterward would be a distraction."

Dr. Bowles cocked her head. "Which, I would infer by your questions, you have engaged in, to distraction."

"It seems I'm not the only one," Delphine managed evenly, "if not to equal consideration. You brought me here on the assumption that you could trust me."

"No," Dr. Bowles countered flatly. "I would never make such an assumption with anyone. Neither should you. You're here on the assessment that Aldous has utterly failed to serve Project Leda in this regard. His attention is far too divided between two competing goals. Whereas you've presented a clear focus: finding a cure. I support that."

"By bringing me here, you've made my decision for me."

Dr. Bowles smiled. "Dr. Cormier, you surprise me. You set this course in motion. If you had not already committed to pursuing it to its conclusion, you should not have started what you're unwilling to finish."

"How does this work?" Delphine asked. "Do I cease to be of the DYAD? Does Cosima? Will that send DYAD after the prodigal self-aware clone?"

"On paper, no. I am assuming official oversight of this arm of research and development. It's already been discussed and settled at the higher levels. When all is ready, news of the changes will be disseminated to relevant parties. You and Cosima will report to me."

"What if there's resistance?"

Dr. Bowles paused, but nodded. "There could be unforeseen complications or consequences, yes. In which case we will take the necessary steps to regroup and smooth out any discord. If needed, a relocation can be arranged." Dr. Bowles's gaze sharpened. "Opinions proposed a shakeup of the DYAD hierarchy. They saw an independent lab as a superfluous measure. I stressed that Ethan Duncan would not work in the halls of the DYAD Institute. That our interests at Topside are better served if we maintain direct control of the hard data. There will have to be something to show for this expense of effort."

"A cure."

Dr. Bowles indulged in a small smirk. "At the least."

"What keeps Aldous from coming after me?" Delphine asked.

Dr. Bowles stood a silent second. "It's unlikely Aldous will be pursuing anyone."

"What do you mean?"

"Aldous's performance is under review."

Dr. Bowles's expression betrayed nothing but the words tumbled down Delphine's spine.

Delphine resisted a frown. "What is there to stop anyone from the DYAD pursuing me or Cosima?"

"In point of fact?" Dr. Bowles mused. "Nothing. You'll be protected here as can be best managed,
"but outside of these walls . . . you'll have to rely on vigilance and good sense."

Delphine shook her head slowly. "Anyone could follow me or Cosima here. Or abduct us or Professor Duncan, if that's their aim."

"I know. Tracing your movements may be easier here in Toronto, but that reality would remain true wherever you were placed. It's a question of who wishes to pursue you, to what ends, and how badly. Containment is a solution to that, but offering to hermetically seal Cosima and Professor Duncan into a laboratory in a remote location didn't seem like an option. Which is to say nothing of the fact that such containment could be implemented on the DYAD premises. But we've been over that."

Delphine crossed her arms. "And what about Professor Duncan? Where will he reside?"

"He can remain with Siobhan Sadler if that's everyone's wish," Dr. Bowles replied without disquiet. "It may be a safe prospect, considering the protection maintained around Kira. Otherwise, arrangements can be made."

Delphine felt neither reassured nor safe. "Is any of this of concern to you at all?"

"On the issue of your safety? For the time being, no," Dr. Bowles declared. "If it would put you at ease, a full-time personal detail could be assigned to you."

Delphine shook her head in refusal. It didn't take the experience of being a monitor to recognize a monitor by another name. Delphine hesitated. "All of the security—they are your personal team?"

Dr. Bowles inclined her head, but not in affirmation, but in acknowledgement of a question being asked.

Delphine held Dr. Bowles's gaze. "How well have you vetted them?"

Dr. Bowles's eyebrows rose. "You think there are those among them who could be . . . Neolutionists, perhaps?"

"Is it better to assume they aren't or to assume they are?" Delphine wondered.

The smile overtook Dr. Bowles's lips with a leisure that enhanced its predatoriness. It was the sum of Dr. Bowles's response.

Delphine tried a different topic. "What is Castor? Why do you need the help of Sarah's mother regarding it?"

Dr. Bowles hesitated. "I'm still waiting to receive corroborating information on that subject."

Delphine changed tack. "What is Castor that it's so important that you were willing to bargain with Sarah about it?"

Dr. Bowles chuckled. It emerged hollow but concluded almost amused. "Bargain? What took place was not a bargain, Dr. Cormier. It was the first step in cooperation. For the benefit of all parties."

"I don't understand."

Dr. Bowles nodded to herself. "I believe you will." She spread her hands to encompass the hall. "Well? What do you think? Will it meet muster with Cosima?"

Delphine swept her gaze around the unpopulated space. "It will have to."
In the parking lot, Dr. Bowles said, "You surprised me. I'm not often surprised to such a degree these days."

Delphine paused in the open door of the sedan in which she'd ridden. "How did I surprise you?"


Delphine contemplated the interior of the car, then straightened up. "Dr. Bowles."

Dr. Bowles raised an eyebrow.

"When was the last time you worked in a lab?" Delphine asked. "The last time you . . . directly conceived and implemented a course of research?"

Dr. Bowles shook her head. "There's a lot of work to be done, a lot of demands on my time."

Delphine nodded. "The possibilities in research drew me to science. What remained unfinished. What could be done. What would be done. Dr. Leekie presented the hands-on opportunity to explore all of that." Delphine exhaled. "It wasn't that I wanted to rise through the ranks of the DYAD and attain a position to oversee developments or to push the thinkers and resources around the board—I wanted access to science I could push to new limits."

"And that's what you got," observed Dr. Bowles.

Delphine hesitated a second, but nodded.

"Is it what you wanted?" Dr. Bowles queried.

Delphine answer in an even, unwavering tone. "I could do without the politics. And the backstabbing. And the veiled death threats."

Dr. Bowles chuckled, a pleased, delighted peal. "Where's your sense of adventure? Ah, to be young again."

"Is the DYAD or some other institute somewhere, under the eye of Topside, not showing promising research into the possibility of restoring youth?" quipped Delphine, more flippantly than she would have dared ten minutes ago.

Dr. Bowles subjected Delphine to an amused, critical eye. "Aldous let you slip between his fingers."

Delphine hesitated. "Is that what happened in the case of Rachel?"

"If only that had been the case," deadpanned Dr. Bowles, the hardness of her tone ending the discussion.

After short consideration, Delphine added, "It was a pleasure to meet Charlotte."

"She enjoyed receiving visitors," Dr. Bowles said simply, but her gaze acquired sharpness. "Eric will take you back to the DYAD Institute." Dr. Bowles smirked. "Rather, Tim Hortons. We'll speak again, Dr. Cormier."
"Jeez, what happened to you?" Cosima said at the sight of Delphine. "If that's what I looked like yesterday, no wonder everyone gave me a hard time."

"You look better rested today," Delphine assured her.

"Yeah, but you don't," Cosima said, "good under eye concealer game notwithstanding."

Delphine paused. "Backhanded compliment?"

"I'm definitely complimenting your under eye concealer effort," Cosima said, "but no amount of layers could hide that amount of tired."

Delphine sighed. She managed a belated and beleaguered smile for their third party. "Hello, Scott."

"Good morning," Scott returned. "I think you look nice, Dr. Cormier."

Delphine exhaled a chuckle that bled some of the morning's tension. "Thank you, Scott."

"Scott would think you look good if you came in dressed in a sack and covered in ashes."

Scott scoffed. "No, I—"

"I'd like to point out that I got here before you," Cosima announced before Scott could finish, "so that probably means you're late." Cosima eyed Delphine. "That doesn't seem like you." Cosima sounded concern, though for Delphine's sake or by the goad of her suspicions was indiscernible. "Did you sleep in past your alarm? Or spend too much time on the—" Cosima gestured to her own face, particularly the vicinity beneath the eyes.

For a solid second, Delphine conducted an internal debate. "No. I encountered Marion Bowles."

Cosima sat up straight. "What? Right now?"

Delphine nodded. "This morning."

"Here?" Cosima pressed.

Delphine strolled into the laboratory, doffing her coat. "Yes. In a manner of speaking."

"So," Cosima said slowly, glancing at Scott, "you talked to her?"

"Yes."

"And?"

"She showed me a lab," Delphine said blithely, taking a free seat.

"Wait, what?" Cosima said, eyes widening. "You saw a lab—the lab? The one we asked for?"

"Yes."

Cosima paused, looking at a loss. "How was it? What do you think?"

Delphine leaned back in the chair. "Its outward appearance is deceiving but it's—it's a fully equipped lab. Heavily guarded." She glanced toward the windows. "It has only one door that serves as entrance and exit as far as I could tell. But I didn't see the entire facility."

Cosima's brow collapsed with consternation, gaze drifting in pursuit of the point in Delphine's choice
to single out that particular detail. "You mean . . . once we're inside, we'd be trapped."

Delphine waved a limp hand. "That was my thought, yes."

Cosima glanced at Scott as in search of reassurance. "She's not going to entrap us the second we step foot inside."

"I agree," Delphine said. "My concern is how we would fare if she decided to take that course at all. Or should there be an assault on the building." Delphine shook her head with weariness. "I don't know."

"Okay," Cosima allowed with uneasiness. "I can't decide if you've reached levels of proper paranoia or gone rocketing past into delusion."

Delphine covered her eyes. Whipping her hand off, she said, to the ceiling, "Where is Professor Duncan going to stay?"

"I hadn't thought about that," admitted Cosima after an interval. "I guess I thought he'd . . . stay with Mrs. S and her people. I mean, they hid him for, like, twenty years."

Delphine pushed herself into the cushions to sit up properly. "Who are Mrs. S's people?"

She and Cosima regarded one another.

"I don't know," Cosima said.

The silence stretched throughout the deadlock of their gazes.

"Shit," Cosima said.

The room stewed on the expletive.

"They're helping us," Cosima managed at last.

"Technically, so is Marion Bowles," Delphine pointed out. "Does Sarah know who Mrs. S's people are?"

"If she does, she hasn't told me," said Cosima, a bit weakly.

Delphine frowned, propping one elbow on the armrest and her chin in hand. "What were the chances that Sarah would be adopted by a woman with a secret network of . . ."

"Freedom fighters?" Cosima suggested.

"Is that what they are?" Delphine wondered.

"Actually—" Cosima spread her hands. "—yeah, something like that? It wasn't chance that someone like Mrs. S adopted Sarah. Sarah only learned this recently, but Mrs. S took her in knowing she was . . . in danger? That this baby was part of . . . something and that people wanted her. Mrs. S hid Sarah. Without knowing what made Sarah special. And Sarah was special. What Sarah figured out, what she told me, was that she was supposed to be . . . well, Rachel. Sarah was supposed to be the child raised by Neolution."

Delphine's mind attempted to square the brash, angry Sarah Manning with the glimpse of the dismissive sophistication of Rachel Duncan. The extremes collided like water and oil. Delphine breathed out the shock. "How did the Neolutionists lose her?"
"Her surrogate mother got suspicious and ran from the program while she was pregnant. She gave Sarah up for adoption."

"And that's when Mrs. S's people took in Sarah?"

"I guess?"

"So Mrs. S isn't part of . . . another cabal?"

"That . . . never occurred to me," Cosima said. "I mean, Sarah's—" Cosima cut herself off.

In the peripheral of her vision, Delphine discerned Scott leaning forward with the same interest that compelled Delphine to prompt, "Sarah is . . . ?"

Cosima shook her head. "Nothing. I mean, you've seen Mrs. S's place. If she were loaded from backroom dealings like Marion Bowles, you'd think she'd beef up the security around Kira in the same way."

Delphine nodded. "Yes. Speaking of security . . ."

"Yeah?"

"Do you feel safe?"

"Right now? Here? Or where we're going?" Cosima asked.

Delphine waved a hand in a vague fashion. "All of it."

"Safe from what? From the DYAD?" Cosima asked. She glanced around aimlessly. "That's what you mean, right? Not some other group?"

"Yes." Delphine rubbed at her eyes. "I don't know. Yes."

Cosima smirked. "I don't think anyone's supposed to feel safe after a Canadian cop with the same face shows up out of the blue and proceeds to tell you that three other lookalikes have been murdered."

Delphine stared hard at Cosima. "Subjects were murdered? Is someone trying to murder you?"

Cosima looked remarkably calm and thoughtful. "I guess not anymore. From that quarter, anyway. Probably."

"What?" Delphine whispered.

"Christian religious fundamentalists," Cosima said with a shrug.

Delphine tried to disentangle sense from Cosima's words as Scott intoned, "Uh . . ."

"Start from the beginning," Delphine requested. "Please."

Cosima folded her arms. "Are you going to put all your cards on the table?"

Delphine pressed her hands together and shook her head. "Cosima, at this point it's clear to me that you know more than I do."

"Yeah, well, whatever sliver you're looking at, I'm not. You blindsided me with Marion Bowles."
Delphine spread her hands. "That was my only 'card.' I have . . . I have nothing else to play."

"Somehow I doubt that," Cosima said.

"Then prepare to be disappointed," Delphine said quietly.

"You don't start at the beginning of stories, either," Cosima stated with casual disregard. "Like how you ran into Marion Bowles this morning and any conversation you two might have had."

Delphine passed a hand over her face. "You want to do this?"

"Why, scared?" challenged Cosima, emboldened by Delphine's reluctance.

"No," Delphine said with a shake of her head. "But I don't want you to be disappointed when you realize I told you the truth."

Cosima smirked. "Well . . . I won't cry as long as you don't cry when you realize how much you didn't want to know."

* *

What Cosima told Delphine:

There was a woman named Elizabeth.

"Beth?" Delphine hazarded.

"Yeah."

"You mentioned her before, I think. Rather—her monitor."

"That's right. Paul. Let me tell the story."

Beth was a police officer, a detective, who lived and worked in Toronto.

"Here?"

"Yeah. I know, right? Talk about being in the shadow of the devil. Like living beneath the eye of Sauron."

Delphine shook her head and held up a hand. "I meant, Beth was working within proximity to Sarah and her family?"

"Hold that thought."

Beth found and contacted Cosima. It was Beth who led the effort to solve the mystery of their matching faces. Among the revelations Beth uncovered was that three other women who looked like them had been killed. A fourth had reached out to Beth and arranged to meet.

Then Beth committed suicide.

"But the rest of us didn't know that," Cosima said. "That's when Sarah appeared. Pretending to be Beth."

"What?"

"Total mind bender, right? It was a total coincidence, but Sarah was—there. When Beth . . ." Cosima
trailed off with an uneasy glance away. "Anyway, Sarah stole Beth's identity and got wrapped up in this whole mess."

Delphine shook her head. "Why did Sarah take Beth's identity?"

"To take Beth's money," Cosima said.

Delphine and Cosima stared at one another.

"To—" Delphine managed. Reassessed. Tried again. "How?"

"There was this bank account... It had money that—" Cosima waved her hands. "It was under Beth's name and Sarah tried to take the money out. She did, actually."

"That's... fraud, isn't it?"

"Yeah."

"A crime."

"Yeah."

"You trust a criminal?" Delphine asked.

"You're asking me that?" Cosima countered. "You might as well ask me if I trust you. Or Leekie. Or Marion Bowles. I'm a walking, talking illegal experiment."

Delphine nodded, acknowledging the point. "You trust Sarah?"

"Today? Yeah."

"Okay."

"You said 'we'—was there someone else involved?"

Cosima nodded. "Alison."

A trip mine of memory froze Delphine's muscles.

Cosima squinted at her. "You knew that?"

Delphine sucked at her lips. "The name sounds familiar."

"Yeah? Like how familiar?"

"I think Aldous mentioned her."

"Mentioned her in what capacity?"

"In relation to you. That she was likely a contact you had among the subjects."

Cosima scanned Delphine's features. "See. I'm learning already. I didn't know you knew that."

"That's all I know about Alison. I wasn't given details."

Delphine regarded Cosima with resignation. "The existence of Alison isn't information you didn't already know."

"I'm learning about you," Cosima said offhandedly. "Cosima's gaze darted to the side. "Right, Scottie?"
Delphine glanced in his direction. She'd forgotten he was there. Scott avoided Delphine's gaze. She swallowed. "What was the Christian fundamental group you mentioned?"

"They call themselves the Proletheans. We're an abomination in their eyes. No surprise. Man playing god, violation of God's will and all that. They want to wipe us off the face of the earth—along with the technology that made us. Well, one sect did. There was this other sect that, I think, was okay with it? Their story and their deal weren't all that clear to me."

Delphine shook her head. "How do you know about them? Why don't you seem afraid when you think they've killed at least three subjects?"

"We've—well, Sarah's met the assassin."

"Met?"

"She's one of us."

"What?"

"She's Sarah's twin, actually."

"What?"

Cosima spread her hands. "Pretty much."


"Sarah's surrogate was pregnant with twins. She gave one child, Sarah, up to the state for adoption and the other child to the Church."

"You're telling me that the Church raised a child to be an assassin?" Delphine asked. "To eliminate . . . clones. How did they know what she was? Or who the other subjects were?"

"Great question. I don't know."

"And the DYAD did not know about her," breathed Delphine.

Cosima see-sawed her hand in the air. "In a manner of speaking. They must have known there was the possibility of lost clones floating around somewhere since they lost one of the surrogates."

Delphine nodded in measured consideration. "Yes. That's why Aldous is focused on Sarah. Not only because of Kira. Though that would be enough. Sarah was outside of the system. Unmonitored. Untracked. She is truly . . . new to him."

"That doesn't sound creepy at all," Cosima said cheerily.

"We're not past that?" Delphine asked, wearily.

"No," Cosima said, somber, "I think it's good to have reminders about how far the window on what's considered 'creepy' has been shifted."

"So . . . there is a clone who is a trained assassin."

"That's right."

"Trained to kill . . . you. And your sisters. But she's no longer trying to harm any of you?"
"According to what Sarah says."

"What about the rest of the . . . Proletheans? Aren't you afraid they're coming after you?"

"Until they show up at my door, I'm not worrying about it."

Delphine stared at Cosima. "You are telling me that one of you—a police officer, no less—suspected that they committed three successful assassinations and you're not going to consider them a threat until they show up in person?"

"Yeah. I've already got an enemy to fight."

"Who?"

"The clone disease?" Cosima deadpanned.

Ah.

Right.

* *

What Delphine told Cosima:

"I was visiting Jennifer when Marion Bowles appeared on her own visit."

"Marion Bowles visited Jennifer? Why?"

"I don't know. She . . . dismissed me and had her driver pick me up and take me to the lab. She let me look around a little bit and we talked."

"Where is it? Did you pay attention?"

"I don't know. Somewhere near water? The driver took a very . . . circuitous route."

"Did you check the GPS on your phone?"

Delphine stared at Cosima blankly. "That did not occur to me."

"Okay," Cosima said in an even tone, but disappointment lurked in her eyes.

Delphine ignored it. "The lab is in the city. Dr. Bowles and I discussed whether the location would be uncomfortable for you or if it was wise regarding security. Whether or not it would be better to relocate entirely. Somewhere remote and hidden."

"She could do that?" Cosima wondered.

"From the way she spoke, yes," Delphine said.

Cosima's gaze drilled into Delphine. "Would you come?"

Delphine sat her back against the chair. She thought of Shay. The weight of Shay's head upon her lap. The test of Shay's tongue against hers. What Shay would say with the knowledge of the decision Delphine faced.

The answers were not compatible.
Delphine covered her eyes.

"Okay," Cosima allowed, giving Delphine a pass. "Why were you visiting Jennifer?"

Delphine dropped her hand. "I don't know. Because I arrived early. Because it's quiet there."

Cosima nodded.

"She was a schoolteacher," Delphine breathed.

"What?" Cosima asked.

Delphine swallowed and gazed into the emptiness of the lab. "Jennifer was a schoolteacher. She taught . . . social studies? Something like history. And she coached swimming."

Cosima was silent.

"When she got sick and her doctor could not help her, her boyfriend 'found' Aldous and the DYAD. He came with her. His name was Greg. He was her monitor."

Cosima's expression remained fixed.

"Greg was my introduction to monitors. He was also involved in swimming and coaching. I forget what he did, it was different from what Jennifer did, but it was how he met her. At a competition." Delphine shook her head. "He didn't know anything. About clones or why she was sick. I don't know where he is now. He's not here."

Cosima frowned.

"Jennifer was an excellent swimmer. Almost good enough to compete at the Olympics at one point. Her students missed her. They sent her cards and emails. She did yoga. She told me I should, too."

Cosima glanced away.

"But that was before the disease . . . advanced." Delphine covered her mouth. "She's not coming with us."

Cosima shook her head. "We couldn't take care of her."

Delphine lowered her hand. "No. We couldn't. Even if we could, it would be risky to move her in her condition."

Cosima studied her. "You liked her, huh?"

"Jennifer was sweet and kind."

"Not like me," cracked Cosima, gaze keen behind her lenses.

"Perhaps exactly like you. Unless the scientific community has come to conclusions about nature versus nurture that I am unaware of."

Cosima gasped a laugh. "Maybe if we conducted several iterations of this experiment we'd get hard facts. The question is whether we'd be willing to go that far and whether the venture would be worth it. I think the jury's still out on whether this one was worth it." Cosima lifted an eyebrow. "You think sweetness and kindness are written in the genes?"
Delphine shook her head. "No."

"Then why try that line?" Cosima asked.

"Power of suggestion?" Delphine proposed with negligence. "Planting a self-fulfilling prophecy?"

Cosima barked a laugh of dark delight. "So I'm not kind or sweet."

"Not to me," murmured Delphine. "Not yet."

"Dude, you need sleep," Cosima said, not unkindly.

Delphine rubbed her face in defeat. "I know."

"Why'd Marion take you to the lab but not me?"

Delphine shook her head. "I don't know. I don't think she planned to run into me and you weren't here yet."

"She could have waited," Cosima pointed out.

"I can't read her thoughts, Cosima. I can barely hold onto my own at the moment."

"So she didn't have anything special to say just to you?" Cosima asked.

Delphine met Cosima's eyes. "We talked about Aldous."

Cosima studied Delphine. After a measure, Cosima nodded.

Cosima didn't prod further. Delphine couldn't tell if she were relieved or not.

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From Cosima [8:09]: Hey. Are you home?
To Cosima [8:11]: Yeah. What's up?
From Cosima [8:11]: Can I return your stuff?
To Cosima [8:12]: Sure. But there's no rush.
From Cosima [8:13]: It's better that I do it now that I'm thinking about it. Otherwise I'll keep forgetting.

Some minutes later Shay answered the knock at her door. Her smile stiffened momentarily in abject surprise.

"Delphine?"

"Cosima sent me," Delphine explained, almost helplessly, bearing the stoneware of Shay's crockpot like an offering to a capricious deity.

Shay touched Delphine's hand. "Hey." Her expression wavered, uncertain, as she took stock of Delphine's appearance. "Are you okay?"

Delphine managed a self-deprecating smile. "I look that good?"

Shay gripped Delphine's wrist and urged her inside. "Let me take that."

Vigor infused Delphine's smile at Shay's dodge of the question, but Delphine voiced no comment as
she yielded the stoneware and the clean, empty tupperware it contained. "Cosima said that the blanket needs to be disinfected before it's returned to you."

Shay smiled. "Anything on it that might have been dangerous is probably dead by now."

"I agree," Delphine said, trailing Shay. "I mentioned that but I suspect she wanted to hold onto it for a little longer."

"I told her she could," Shay said.

Slipping her hands into her pockets—her dress pants had pockets—Delphine rocked on her feet. "But what if I wanted to use it?"

Shay glanced over, duped into a skeptical grin. "Do you?"

"What else will keep me warm on the couch?" Delphine countered.

Shay shook her head. "You need a bed."

A subtle energy straightened Delphine's shoulders and sharpened her gaze. "Yes."

"To sleep," Shay said gently.

"Yes," Delphine agreed, with a tinge of reluctance.

Shay stepped close and touched Delphine's face. "You look so tired. What happened? Did you not sleep last night?"

Delphine leaned into Shay's touch, eyes closing, and covered Shay's hand. Delphine said nothing. The sag in her posture made her look asleep on her feet.

Shay stroked Delphine's cheek. "Are you hungry?"

"No," Delphine murmured.

"Did you eat dinner?"

A wistful smile whirled over Delphine's lips. "Yes. With Cosima."

"Do you want to lie down?"

Opening her eyes, Delphine captured Shay's hand and lowered it wrapped within hers. "Will you join me?"

"Do you want a massage?" offered Shay.

Delphine raised an eyebrow. "I thought you said I needed the bed."

"I did. You do. That's where you can lie down and I can give you a massage."

Delphine's gaze fixed on Shay, inscrutable.

"And there are truffles," Shay pointed out.

"No," Delphine said lowly, "thank you. Not right now. But I'd like to lie down, yes."

"And the massage?"
"Are you sure?"

Shay smiled, armed with a teasing retort, but aware that Delphine was only being solicitous. "I'm sure."

Shay turned down the bed, folding back comforter and top sheet.

"Get undressed and lie down," Shay instructed Delphine as she went off to procure oil and a clean towel.

"Are you sure?" Delphine asked, surprise in her voice.

"Like it's a session, Delphine," chided Shay lightly.

"Of course," Delphine said, subdued, obeying. Shay had no sense of Delphine's progress. She crossed first to the blinds to close them and, keeping her back to Delphine, lit a few candles, one scented lavender, another vanilla, taking her time.

If Shay were honest, she expected that when she turned around she would find Delphine waiting nude and languishing in welcome upon the bed.

Delphine wasn't. Either nude or seductive.

Delphine lay upon her stomach, head on the pillow, under which her arms were crossed, her back a lean and sinuous expanse bared in trust. Shay carried over the bottle of oil and towel, set them beside the bed, pulled up the top sheet to cover Delphine's legs, and popped into the bathroom to wash her hands.

Shay carefully swept the unbound hair off Delphine's shoulders before beginning. She warmed the oil between her hands, then proceeded with the intent that had marked the outset of their acquaintance.

"This is like old times," remarked Delphine after a few minutes.

Shay smiled. "I was thinking the same thing."

"Do you remember the first time?"

"What do you mean?"

"What I felt like under your hands."

Shay quested for the bedrock of memories beneath the layers of their many subsequent interactions, dredging up the distant and formal professionalism that had scripted the interactions of two strangers. "That first time I was trying to gauge your physical state. You were still experiencing a lot of stiffness and soreness. Your muscles were tender and you tensed under my touch. You gave very curt responses to my questions. Not in a rude way, but I wasn't sure if you were interested in what I could do."

"I wasn't sure, either."

Shay passed her hands over the surgery scars on Delphine's shoulder. They were clean and thin, but contrasted with Delphine's complexion. Shay dug her fingers into the chronic problem areas. Delphine stiffened under the pressure of the initial assault and then relaxed.

"I remember what you told me," Delphine said.
"What did I tell you?"

"That the best way I could help you help me was to talk to you."

Shay smiled to herself. "That sounds about right."

"You were right," Delphine said.

"Oh, I was right? I won one? Finally?" Shay wondered. "Do we need to mark the occasion?"

"It is not the first time you've been right," chided Delphine. "But on that point you were more right than you knew."

Shay's eyebrows rose. "Yeah?"

"Do you remember what you said at the museum? That you weren't changing me, that you were only listening?"

Shay nodded. "Yeah."

"Why can't it be that the process of talking itself was the process by which I explored new possibilities? That talking provided the opportunity to take different paths of thought."

"Is that what you think?"

"I think that I cannot imagine anyone else in my life at the moment who could have provided the same outlet."

Shay smiled. "Your sounding board."

Delphine was silent.

"Like I said then," added Shay.

"You did," conceded Delphine.

Shay's smile widened. On a whim, Shay indulged an impulse unthinkable in the office: she dropped a kiss upon Delphine's scars.

The muscles beneath the skin twitched, almost in the way Shay had seen backs of cats ripple at an unexpected touch. Delphine lay still and then turned, looking over her unmarred shoulder at Shay. "But the way you say it—you present yourself as an impassive, neutral party that served as... witness. A bystander to the event. I am saying that's not the case. That it was important that it was you."

They surveyed one another. Every day brought a little lesson about Delphine. Tonight's was that Delphine would be undeterred. Shay reached across and, using her pinky, tucked stray strands of Delphine's hair behind her ear. "I'm not so sure."

Delphine propped herself higher upon a forearm. "Why?"

Shay passed her hands across the breadth of Delphine's shoulders. "Lie down."

"Are you going to ignore my question?"

"No."
Delphine complied. Shay resumed her work, taking the minutes of physical ministration to collect her thoughts. "No one changes who isn't open or willing to change. I'm pretty sure I never changed your mind about whether or not we have souls—and I doubt I'd ever be able to. But the topics you brought up, those were things you were already questioning. You wanted to talk about them because your opinions on them were changing or were challenged—but not by me. By you. By circumstances completely unrelated to me."

"And it was you whom I talked to."

"Yes," said Shay.

"You think my experience would have been no different if I had spoken to Cosima?"

Shay gave freedom to the giggle that wiggled up from the pit of her diaphragm, but somber consideration curtailed the length of her amusement. "The experience would have been different, but I wouldn't assume that it would have been less helpful or that it would have changed the outcome. You don't usually talk to me in specifics because you don't need me to know the specifics. You want to hear an outside perspective—but I don't know if that perspective necessarily has to be mine."

"You don't understand," Delphine said. "I talked to you because I knew I could talk to you."

Shay kneaded at a knot in silence.

"You listened to me. Like this, do you remember?" Delphine exhaled sharply through her nose as Shay shifted to the left a centimeter. "About my hurts when you asked about them, and then when you didn't have to ask anymore. Then about work, when I came to you tired. About anything. You showed me how you listen. That's why it was you. Why it had to be you."

Shay poured more oil onto her hands and warmed it between her palms.

"If not for an accident," Delphine added, "we may have never met."

Shay traced her thumb from beauty mark to beauty mark among the cluster on Delphine's back, another gesture she'd have never dared to consider with a client.

"You don't agree?" Delphine asked into Shay's silence.

"Do you believe in fate?" Shay asked.

"Do you?" countered Delphine. "Are you suggesting I met with misfortune in order that I could meet you?"

Shay smiled to herself. "That does sound cruel and unusual."

Delphine shifted in a manner that suggested looking at Shay, though her head was turned to face the opposite way. "You didn't say if you consider that an act of fate."

"I meant that maybe we would have met through some other course of circumstances."

"Do you really think that? How would our lives have crossed? Do you think that I would sign up for Sapphire and we would discover each other?"

Shay snickered to herself, doubtless as Delphine intended. "Sapphire? Do you think you would have ended up there?"

"If our meeting is destined, perhaps fate would guide me. Do you believe in fate?" Delphine asked in
a gentle voice.

"I don't know," Shay answered at equally soft volume. Her touch softened as she spoke. "Do you ever feel that you have to tell yourself stories? To—to make sense of things you can't understand? Or things yet to happen?"

Delphine lay quiet.

Having asked, the prospect felt incongruous with what Shay had constructed of Delphine's outlook.

Shay shook her head ruefully. "There were times I wanted—maybe even needed—to believe in a force like fate. That something had to happen, meaning that I'd had no power over stopping it or changing it. Or that something would happen. Eventually. With or without my contribution. But thinking like that makes you wrestle with whether that's just escapism or refusing to take responsibility. It doesn't make much sense, does it, that I should have had to go through all these things that brought me to Toronto and wound up in this profession just so I could meet you? But when you frame it like that, there's . . . there's something powerful about the idea, too. But maybe it only feels compelling in this moment. Maybe ten years from now we'll be estranged and . . . you'll laugh at the thought of me or . . . be disgusted or something."

"But if fate ordains our movements," Delphine said, unfazed, "would that not be fate as well?"

Shay leaned into the next stroke. "That's the type of thinking that helps with heartache."

"Whose heartache? Yours or mine?"

"Which one of us would use that way of thinking as a coping mechanism?" Shay countered, near chiding.

"You're saying that I would break your heart, not that you would break mine?"

Shay clamped her lips together.

"I don't know if that indicates that you underestimate your influence," Delphine said softly, "or that you don't trust me."

Shay concentrated on Delphine's lower back where her fingers relayed a swath of tension.

"Or maybe both cases have bearing in this instance," amended Delphine, tensing momentarily beneath the pressure. "But perhaps that's wise. It may be good for one of us to exercise caution."

Shay smiled to herself. "Then it probably shouldn't be me. I don't have much experience being the cautious one."

"Really?" wondered Delphine.

Shay shrugged. "Really. I have a tendency to fall into things head first."

"So it's with me that you're cautious?" prodded Delphine.

"It's more like," Shay said in a measured tone, "I try to be cautious but realize sooner or later that I was kidding myself." She inserted a pause. "Usually that means I get hurt."

"Chat échaudé craint l'eau froide," murmured Delphine into her arm.

"What does that mean?" Shay asked softly.
Delphine hummed. "A literal translation is a cat burned by hot water fears cold water. It means that... one—or previous—one experience makes people afraid of all subsequent experiences that appear similar."

Shay ruminated. "Once bitten, twice shy."

"Does that have the same meaning?"

"I think so. It's the idiom I would use."

Delphine nodded. "Others have made you shy."

They were quiet for a time. Shay felt shy to pick up the thread, unsure where the topic might lead, where their thoughts would collide.

Delphine punctured the silence with unintelligible noises that tickled the air molecules in an attempt to be words.

"What was that?" Shay asked.

Delphine adjusted the lay of her head to free her mouth and asked, sleep in her voice, "Would you relocate for someone? And change your name? And hide from the world?"

Shay tried to suss out meaning. "Is that a marriage proposal and an invitation to run away—to a deserted island or some other remote location?"

"Would you accept?" Delphine asked without hesitation.

Shay's stomach clenched, but she felt her facial muscles respond with an uneasy smile. "There's this thing—I don't know if you've heard of it—that they say about lesbians, a stereotype—called U-hauling—about how quickly lesbian relationships escalate. The observation—or joke, I guess—is that lesbians will move in with one another after being together for a short amount of time." Shay smirked, unseen, but fondly. "Leave it to you to surpass even that. Overachiever."

Delphine was quiet for a time. "What if I had to relocate, and change my name, and hide?"

Shay's hands paused and then resumed. "Is this a purely hypothetical question?"

Delphine didn't answer immediately. "That's too much to ask, isn't it?"

There wasn't so much sleep in her voice as a tint of sorrow.

"What's too much?" prodded Shay gently.

"A question like that," Delphine said, dismissive. "Perhaps you're right."

Shay feigned shock. "Again? About what?"

"A cautious approach," Delphine muttered.

"To you?" ventured Shay for clarification.

"Yes," confirmed Delphine, low and drifting. "It is too late for me to adapt."

They fell into silence. In ten minutes Shay realized Delphine's respiration had deepened and a quick check revealed Delphine had fallen asleep. Shay finished with a gentle rubdown, carefully towed.
off what oil she could from Delphine's—glistening—skin, and pulled up the blankets to cover Delphine's prone form. As she settled the comforter around Delphine's shoulders, Shay pressed her lips to the crown of Delphine's head—ginger and surreptitious.

In a word, cautious. In manner, at least.

Chapter End Notes

For those who have been waiting for an update, thank you for your patience over the hiatus. Please have more patience with me as we move along.

For those just joining, thank you for reading.

Thank you. :)


Chapter 43

The sound of a door meeting the jamb hoisted Delphine into consciousness. She turned toward the source, the nerves of her torso issuing an alert that no barrier existed between her skin and the sheet atop her. With the tactile knowledge settling at the recess of her scattered thoughts, Delphine blinked at a flushed Shay, in leggings and jacket and ear warmers, evidently returned from an outing and taking notice of Delphine's consciousness.

"I have a question," Delphine declared before Shay mustered the breath to speak.

Shay nodded and gasped, "Yeah?"

"How do you run in this cold?"

Shay grinned. "Very quickly. How did you sleep?"

Delphine rubbed at an eye. "Very well. Which is no surprise with the inducement I had. Thank you." Delphine glanced at the other half of the bed. "I didn't notice you get up."

"I slept on the couch," Shay clarified, wrestling with the laces of her sneakers. "Do you want to hop in the shower first?"

Delphine's answer was prefaced by a brief pause spanning the breadth of the untouched side of the bed. "No. You go first."

"Okay," Shay breathed, free of her footwear. "Help yourself to anything in the kitchen if you're hungry or thirsty. You should probably have a glass of water—I didn't want to wake you up last night to force you to drink some. And I, uh, hung up your clothes in the closet. Feel free to borrow a t-shirt or whatever, but I don't think I have anything business formal that would fit you." Shay smiled. "I'll get you an extra towel when I'm not so gross."

A smile overwhelmed Delphine. "Thank you."

Left to her own devices, Delphine slipped out of bed, shivering a moment at the difference in temperature, and investigated the closet. Folded and tucked among a stack of clean laundry lay the ARMY t-shirt. Delphine ran her fingers over the soft cotton, slid it free, and pulled the tee on in the meanwhile as she rehydrated and waited. When Shay emerged from the bathroom clean and faintly floral, Delphine intercepted her to steal a quick kiss.

"Good morning," Delphine said, correcting the earlier neglected opportunity.

Shay gazed up at Delphine, slightly stunned. The smile curved her lips by increments retreating and advancing. "Good morning."

* *

Breakfast with Delphine consisted primarily of watching Delphine sip a mug of coffee—what remained of the grounds Shay had bought weeks ago—and smile to herself without context.

Shay didn't ask. But she didn't feel excluded. She liked the sight of the smile, soft, lurking, lacking self-consciousness.

Joining Delphine at the table with a mug of breakfast tea and a bowl of oatmeal, Shay remarked
upon the single slice of buttered toast on a plate before Delphine. "I should have grabbed some croissants while I was out."

Delphine raised an eyebrow. "Is there a boulangerie nearby?"

"I have no idea, but I can look into it," Shay said. "What else was it that you said you would buy? Pain au chocolat?"

Delphine smiled. "Pain au chocolat, yes." In the carefully enunciated echo lurked a correction to Shay's pronunciation. Shay suspected it was why Delphine had smiled. "When I was younger, I would buy pain au chocolat or a croissant almost everyday, but it is not something I would eat everyday now."

"Why not?" Shay asked.

"Well . . . I don't know a bakery here that would entice me to do so."

Bakery. Shay hid a smile behind her mug of tea. "Okay, but if you did find one, would you have one or the other everyday?"

Delphine appeared to fall into serious consideration. "It would be tempting."

"What would hold you back?" Shay wondered.

"A slowing metabolism," Delphine answered with a touch of resigned sadness.

Shay stared at Delphine, so amazed she bypassed laughter. "Would that really be the reason?"

"There is something I heard said in English," Delphine said measuredly. "Everything . . . in moderation?"

Raising her spoon, Shay nodded. "Yes."

Delphine gestured in an aimless fashion. "Croissants and pains au chocolat in moderation."

Shay smirked around a bite of oatmeal. "Okay, but if you were in Paris for a few weeks—"

"Oh, everyday," Delphine supplied immediately. "A few weeks—a month—averaged out over a year would amount to moderation."

Shay grinned. "Is that how the math of consumption works?"

"Unless you're going to tell me otherwise," Delphine countered blithely. "How is it that you seem to be encouraging me to make poor diet choices? You of all people should agree with a plan of moderation."

Shay stirred the oatmeal, wryness lacing the assessment of her gaze. "It's not like you consume wild proportions. If anything, I worry that you don't get enough to eat—that you skip meals. In which case, you have some wiggle room to enjoy croissants and pain au chocolat."

Delphine's lips twitched at the corners.

Shay added, "And if it makes you happy . . ." and trailed off.

Delphine smiled, the curve of her lips and the sparkle of her eyes so devoid of teasing mirth or joyful cynicism that Shay looked away. Delphine spoke softly. "Currently I'm finding happiness in new
places." Shay glanced up and a pinch of mischief twisted the edge of Delphine's mouth. "To bring together old joys and new joys would be . . . transcendent."

The spoon danced figure eights through the oatmeal while Shay considered Delphine with a touch of wariness. "I can't tell if maybe you're using 'transcendent' in the vein of the spiritual concept or if you're using it to see if I'll bring up the spiritual concept."

"You don't have to suspect me of goading you in order to talk about it—or to correct me."

"Correct you," Shay repeated, tone dry and bland.

Delphine maintained level, unflinching eye contact. "Yes."

Shay dropped her attention into her bowl. "Okay."

Delphine paused. "You correct me on many occasions."

"Yeah," agreed Shay breezily.

"Except in moments like this where you want to correct me but don't."

Shay glanced up through her lashes. A moment's thought tugged her lips into a smirk. "Is this going to be a thing?"

"What?" Delphine asked.

"You think I'm withholding something so you try to corner me to say it."

An eyebrow lifted. "Are you withholding something?"

"You think I am," Shay said.

Delphine nodded, unflustered. "I do. Are you?"

Shay sucked at her lower lip. "I think you phrased it wrong."

Delphine set her coffee mug down and leaned forward. "Phrased what wrong?"

"The thing about correcting you." Shay scooped a small bite of oatmeal into her mouth and chewed quickly. Delphine watched her expectantly, waiting for elucidation. Shay glanced at the clock. If Delphine was willing to needle on a hunch, this topic had advanced to a point of unavoidable. Shay was going to answer now or later. She licked her lips and eyed Delphine. "Were you trying to get me to 'correct' you in the first place by using 'transcendent'?"

Delphine betrayed no immediate reaction to the inquiry, leaving Shay to study her until Delphine smiled and said, "You're willing to give me a lot of credit."

Shay tapped her spoon against the inside of the bowl. "You were the one who lectured me about the function of extra credit and I know how much of an overachiever you are . . ."

The teasing in Shay's tone prompted Delphine's smile to widen. "In this case, it's undeserved. I did not realize there was so much depth to transcendence until you pointed it out. I was too preoccupied trying to impress you with my vocabulary."

Shay hesitated, some of the wind abating in her sails. "Really?"
"Not really," admitted Delphine, smile undeterred. "But I enjoy that you seem to enjoy it."

Shay rolled her eyes.

"You were saying?" prompted Delphine.

Shay waved her empty hand carelessly. "Talking about transcendence wouldn't have been a matter of 'correcting' you. Discussion, but not correction." Shay paused. "This was correcting you. And your use of 'correct.' And, if we're making distinctions, I don't usually correct you—like this. Actually I don't really correct you like this unless you make me correct you like this."

Delphine's mouth stretched and stretched as Shay spoke. "Aren't you happy you did?"

Shay shook her head. "No."

"I am."

"I know. I can tell."

"Yes, because," Delphine said, voice softening, "as much as you get me to talk—or," Delphine amended quickly, "as much as I feel free to talk to you—your approach with me is not the same. So when you talk to me like this—honestly—it makes me happy."

Working at a large dollop of oatmeal in her hurry to finish her oatmeal, Shay slowed and sucked on the end of her spoon. She could have denied Delphine's words, told Delphine that she was wrong—but that would have been disingenuous and they'd have both known it, whether or not Delphine called her out. Shay eased down the gates reflexively thrown up by her defenses and let Delphine's words filter in.

Shay attempted a smile. "You have to be patient with me."

Delphine smiled back. "As I've said, it would only be fair."

* *

Shay washed the dishes. Delphine wiped the table and watered needy plants—upon insistence that she contribute to completing chores. Shay sent Delphine off with the watering can and strict instructions to avoid the succulents and to check the moisture levels in the soil for the others.

"Delphine?" Shay called.

"Yes?" Delphine replied.

Shay sucked at her lips, taking comfort in the fact that she was facing the wall. "Was there a reason why you looked so tired yesterday?"

The answer came at a delay. "I had difficulty sleeping."

"Yeah?"

"I was . . . worried about some things related to work."

Shay nodded.

"And," Delphine added, coming up beside her to set the watering can on the counter, "a little about how the evening went."
Shay glanced over sharply. "It was great. Dinner was amazing and delicious. I couldn't believe how out of your way you went for me."

Delphine shook her head. "Not out of my way."

"I know, I know," Shay said. She scooted over to give Delphine room to wash her hands. "You know what I mean."

"I'm waiting for you to think the same way," Delphine said mildly as she worked up a lather over her hands.

Shay placed a hand upon Delphine's wrist. "It was great. Thank you. Really."

A second's rumination preceded Delphine's smile. Quick, she leaned over and pressed a kiss to Shay's temple.

"This is great," Delphine said.

The brightness of Delphine's eyes brooked no argument. Shay held her breath. She couldn't have mustered an objection if she'd wanted to.

* * *

Wiping down the counter, Shay's eye caught on the box of truffles.

"Hey," she called out to Delphine, "do you want a truffle for the road?"

Delphine looked up from zipping up a boot. "Only if we share it."

"Sure. Do you want to pick one?"

"You do the honors," Delphine said. "I'll be over in a second."

Shay hung the towel to dry and pulled the box down from the shelf. Delphine joined Shay attired as she'd arrived, her commute to work longer than Shay's. Shay held up a truffle to Delphine's mouth.

When Delphine, mouth bearing chocolate, leaned down toward her, Shay received her expectantly with a welcoming smile.

* * *

Cosima scrutinized Delphine the moment she set her coat aside. The question, however, gestated for at least an hour.

"Is that the same outfit you wore yesterday?" Cosima asked.

"Yes," Delphine answered shortly.

A beat measured Cosima's silence. "Okay." Her gaze lingered on Delphine's attire. "Is today laundry day?" She paused. "Or did you have an adventure last night?"

"An adventure in sleep, perhaps," Delphine replied with offhand negligence.

Scott's ear turned a degree toward their conversation. Cosima's lips thinned.

"Adventures in sleep as in—"
"The adventure was catching up on sleep," Delphine supplied before whimsy carried off Cosima.

But later, sidling up close and speaking low, Cosima asked, "Did you meet up with Leekie last night?"

Delphine turned to Cosima sharply, shock and anger and affront tugging the muscles of her face toward competing contortions. Cosima parsed the chaos in unwavering evaluation.

Composure coalescing, Delphine managed an even, "No." She stewed. "You think if I had that I would be this sloppy?"

Cosima eyed Delphine's outfit with skepticism. "I didn't expect you to be sloppy at all."

The judgment and taunt couched in the remark almost compelled the truth to snap off of Delphine's tongue. But Delphine bit it back. She didn't have to justify herself to Cosima.

"The truth is that Aldous has not bothered with me in some time in any substantive manner—in any capacity." Cosima lifted an eyebrow. Delphine continued, unmindful. "I don't know if that's a good sign or a bad sign. It could indicate he is ignorant to what is about to happen or that he's determined to keep me ignorant of whatever he's devising. Or both. But you're right. We can't give anything away at this stage. I'll be more careful to maintain appearances in the future." Delphine pitched her voice higher, to lighten the mood. "Maybe a full night's rest affected my judgment and lulled me into a sense of security."

Cosima nodded in an absent air. "You realize none of that explains why you're wearing the exact same outfit you wore yesterday."

"No, it doesn't," agreed Delphine blithely.

Cosima's chin dimpled. "How did Shay sleep?"

Delphine turned to Cosima with as much fluidity the sudden tension in her muscles allowed. "Are you trying to be an asshole?"

Cosima grinned, eyes alight. "What was that?"

"I said," Delphine answered, skirting terse, "are you trying to be an asshole?"

Cosima's grin deepened at the corners. "Full disclosure: I heard you the first time but I wanted to hear you say 'asshole' again."

Delphine rolled her eyes. "Then prepare yourself: you're being an asshole."

Cosima's grin threatened to engulf her face. "I'm being properly cautious. You're one of the few people who could throw a wrench into the plan by letting the cat out of the bag."

"So now you are my monitor?" Delphine asked archly.

Cosima's brow dipped. "That's the way it's always been. If you weren't spending the night with Leekie or with Shay, yeah, I'm going to wonder if there's some other party I have to worry about. Because I doubt you went to bed at your own place in yesterday's outfit, woke up, and decided it wasn't worth the effort to change. Case in point: I didn't know about Marion Bowles until you led us to her doorstep. Did you crash at Marion's?"

"I fell asleep at Shay's," Delphine said, curt. "That shouldn't surprise you, given that you sent me
downstairs to return her things."

"Any reason you didn't offer to give me a ride this morning?"

"I don't know," Delphine said, flippancy infiltrating her tone. "It didn't occur to me. But it seems I
avoided an interrogation first thing in the morning."

Cosima's gaze caught and held Delphine's eyes. "I'm not going to apologize for watching my back."

It was Delphine who looked away. "I understand. But you're not the only one watching your back."

"Why, Dr. Cormier, I don't know if you mean that you're as properly paranoid as I am or that you've been appreciating my backside."

"Neither," deflected Delphine promptly.

"You're missing out," declared Cosima. "I've got a good backside."

Delphine weighed the assertion. "Yes." She paused as Cosima slipped back into a grin. "All of you
are remarkable physical specimens."

Cosima's mouth stretched as wide as her fine physical attributes would allow. "Now who's being an asshole?"

* *

Pride fostered a reluctance to cede that the recent days in the lab amounted to passing time, but the three of them accomplished little more in the work day than tread water. Each knew that the real work awaited in the sequences to which Professor Duncan held the key and that, until those were unlocked, their efforts were stalled. They were stuck puttering in pocket realms of curiosities. Cosima's blood work returned encouraging numbers in favor of the stem cell treatment—and for the first time Delphine and Cosima were saved the trouble of having to depart from the lab for privacy. The hanging question of the patent's legitimacy stretched the limits of their legal knowledge into threadbare weaves and wefts. Which was still more substantial than the filament-thin connections between Marion Bowles and Topside and the DYAD and the Neolutionists that defied clear definition or any semblance of big-picture sense.

But one area did offer fertile grounds to till. The list. Of the other subjects.

Restless and using her appearance as an excuse, Delphine returned home during the lunch "break," freshened up, changed, and scrabbled together a light assortment of sustenance, including the last remainders of the bouillabaisse. As she put on her coat, notebook and USB stick prepared for transport, Delphine glimpsed the box of truffles. The morning's warmth settled upon her. Smiling, Delphine took out her phone.

To Shay [12:45]: I ate lunch.
To Shay [12:46]: I felt you should know. I don't skip meals as often as you seem to worry I do.
To Shay [12:47]: But dessert does not look appealing without you here to share it.

Returning to the DYAD, she was almost surprised to find that Cosima and Scott hadn't abandoned the pretense of the day. Cosima smirked at the sight of her in different clothing, but became keen when Delphine set up the notebook. Cosima and Scott approached in cautious curiosity, then leaned in eagerly when Delphine pivoted the screen toward them.

Cosima reached for the keyboard but stopped short of laying her fingers upon it. "May I?"
Delphine nodded and pushed the notebook toward her.

With Scott peering over her shoulder, Cosima dove into the contents. "Marion Bowles gave you all of this?"

Delphine nodded.

Cosima's eyes narrowed. "It's . . . it's everything about them. Tag numbers and names and hospital records. Holy shit."

Delphine stepped away and ceded the device to their hungry gazes. The excitement soon waned. Delphine saw the magnitude of the crisis drain the inkling of color from Cosima's pallor and straighten the nervous slouch from Scott's posture.

Cosima and Scott scoured the files. Delphine sat back and more or less watched them, detached from the intensity of their efforts. But stillness was not a state Delphine occupied with ease. Delphine resented the imposed hiatus, the anticipation coupled to anxiety, shackled in hostage to the knowledge that relief and purpose would come, but suspended in the uncertainty as to when it would arrive. It wasn't the waiting that eroded Delphine's presence of mind.

It was the lack of control.

It was her lack of control stripped to bald display before her own eyes. Not that she had been in complete control under the auspices of Aldous Leekie or that moving into Marion Bowles's sphere of influence altered the status quo or her place in it, but before this moment, even as Cosima's monitor, Delphine had managed to carve out room to wiggle. To pursue answers. To seek avenues. To consult her conscience. But now she felt pulled taut—and paralyzed—by demands competing on an open field.

Cosima.

Marion Bowles.

Shay.

Herself.

To align and satisfy every sector seemed impossible. Delphine wasn't sure she wanted to, and less sure if she could choose which to prioritize. But she would have to decide. The looming prospect fed the trepidation.

Her phone vibrated.

From Shay [14:18]: That's good news. What was on the menu for dessert?
To Shay [14:19]: Truffles. I went home for lunch.
From Shay [14:20]: U don't have to wait for me to eat them.
To Shay [14:21]: I know. But they seem more appealing when I can share them with you.
From Shay [14:21]: Rly?

Delphine contemplated a fittingly exasperating reply when Cosima asked, "Why did she give you all of this?"

Delphine glanced up. "Because I asked?"

"Yeah," Cosima said, missing the undertone of flippancy in Delphine's answer, "but why this much
information, uncensored? Does your security clearance even qualify for half of this material?"

Delphine lowered her phone. "No, but Marion Bowles has access. Perhaps that was the point. She took the chance to exhibit her power and her reach and her ability to deliver what I requested. The same with the laboratory."

Cosima shook her head, leaning back in the chair and covering her mouth with a hand. "She took a risk giving you this much. What kind of power game is she playing? It's not against Leekie. It's like he's not even in her league. Who does Marion Bowles answer to?"

"Presumably not to Neolutionists," Delphine supplied.

"What if she is a Neolutionist?" Scott wondered. "Is that possible?"

Cosima massaged the back of her neck. "I guess we'll find out when Professor Duncan looks her in the eyes."

Delphine chuckled. "What? You think Professor Duncan has powers to detect Neolutionists?"

"He's cultivated hate for them for like twenty years, it's got to amount to something."

"He wants to see Rachel," Delphine said quietly.

Cosima nodded. "He'll probably approach Marion Bowles about it."

"It's not our business?" Delphine wondered.

"Until it interferes with our business," muttered Cosima darkly. She shook her head. "We . . . focus on the science. That's the plan. We follow the science."

Scott exhaled uneasily.

Delphine released a heartfelt sigh.

Scott abandoned the pretense first. He mentioned picking up cat food. Which revealed to Delphine that Scott had a cat. An innocuous bit of information, but one that bloomed into significance in Delphine's head. Scott had a cat. A creature depended on him. What would happen to the cat without Scott?

Would Delphine have to adopt a cat if something happened to Scott? Fur showed on dark clothing like glitter. She remembered the veritable blanket her grandfather's cat left on her clothes. Maybe Cosima would volunteer?

Who would take care of the cat that required cat food in the absence of Scott?

It seemed, in the moment of revelation, a potentially pressing problem. It distracted from the possibility that Scott had wandered into the pit of snakes with them. Yet it positioned a magnifying glass upon the issue of his safety.

A cat.

(What would Delphine leave behind? Who would step forward to pick up the pieces or close her affairs?)
Delphine almost mentioned the line of her thoughts. To Cosima. But the newfound privacy conferred no additional levels of permission or confidence between them. As if before they'd been united in conspiracy to exclude Scott and with the necessity gone they were unsure what foundation remained to bind them.

She and Cosima didn't opt to linger long in the quiet lab.

As Delphine disconnected the USB stick from the notebook to pack the items, Cosima eyed it with banked covetousness. Delphine registered Cosima's lips parting when the ringtone sounded. They both froze in the immediate confusion of determining whose phone demanded attention.


Delphine stowed equipment in mindful silence, not ignoring Cosima, but making an effort not to appear to be eavesdropping—or to consciously do so.

Lowering the phone, Cosima waltzed back across the room. "Do you want to go on a field trip?"

"Field trip?"

Cosima clutched the back of a chair. "Marion Bowles wants to meet."

"She didn't contact me," Delphine pointed out.

"She didn't contact me, either," Cosima said, "but Sarah wants me with her. In case it gets 'science-y'."

"You don't need me, then," Delphine said quietly.

"No," agreed Cosima, "but you're part of this now."

"My presence might not be welcome," Delphine countered.

Cosima shrugged. "I'm not going to make Marion Bowles happy."

"Where is the meeting taking place?"

"I'm not sure. Sarah's waiting for us to rendezvous with her and Marion Bowles will take care of the rest. She's probably going to send another limo."

Delphine smiled to herself. "So you need a ride."

"No," Cosima declared, "but I wouldn't refuse an offer of one."

"What do you think this is about?"

"One lab equipped and ready to hand over?"

"She's going to show it to you at this hour?"

Cosima waved a hand. "Who knows what her schedule looks like? Maybe this was the only time she
Delphine chuckled. "Yes. Perhaps."

"Are you in?" Cosima asked.

Delphine nodded absently. "I can probably get you to Sarah sooner than an—Uber?"

Cosima smirked, but she didn't contradict Delphine.

The address that Cosima directed them to was not a district to which Delphine had ventured before. Delphine glided to a stop before the stoop of a darkened rowhouse that Cosima's phone informed them was their destination. Discernible around the corner was the hood of a recognizable truck.

"Where is this?" Delphine asked.

"I've never been here before," Cosima muttered. "But I have a guess."

Delphine shot her a look of inquiry.

"This is Beth's place," Cosima breathed.

"The police officer?" Delphine conducted a closer assessment of the property. "Does this city pay its police officers very well?"

"I don't know," Cosima said, "but Beth didn't live alone. She lived with her boyfriend. Her monitor. I'm pretty sure he was on DYAD's payroll. And you know what that means."

Delphine frowned.

Cosima glanced over. "I doubt they wanted for anything. Financially."

Delphine shook her head slowly. "They could not have done this for every subject."

"You mean provide sugar daddies and mommies?"

"That is one way of putting it," Delphine replied with studied blandness.

"You don't think they could? Their pockets run deep enough," Cosima said.

"But it doesn't make sense in the context of the study. They weren't aiming for uniformity, so they would not have maintained every subject at the same economic level."

"But consider the type of women capable of affording IVF in the eighties. We're talking a baseline level of financial means."

Delphine nodded absently. "Which might have changed in the following years. There may have been setbacks or divorces or—" Delphine shook her head. "—recessions that altered fortunes."

"Right, but I'm saying that a lot of us—if not most of us—if not all of us—probably grew up with, like, a degree of middle class comfort. Which, I would speculate, fostered expectations of economic . . . acceptability."

"Is that a word?" Delphine asked delicately.
"Yeah. It's a word. Totally." Cosima waved her hands to disperse the doubt. "Look, the game changed at the point we entered the larger world and needed minders and observers. Propping us up with monitors probably involves a degree of manufacturing circumstances to generate different outcomes. Monitors are tailored to the tastes of the subject. You only get to stick around if we let you stick around and you only get as much access as we cede. Present company excepted. Somewhat." Delphine wasn't sure if that softened Cosima's criticism or weighted it. Cosima shrugged. "Maybe this—" Cosima indicated the property with a tilt of her head. "—is what appealed to Beth."

"You knew her, yes? Is that how you read the situation?"

"We are all so different, dude," Cosima said with a laugh, but quieted into thoughtfulness. "And maybe not so different. I don't know what appealed to Beth. Besides finding the truth. She wasn't the buddy-buddy type. She kept her private life, private. Which, I guess, makes it more tragic that it was never private."

Delphine squinted at the door. "Is Sarah inside?"

Cosima followed her line of sight. "I hope so. I wouldn't want her freezing in the truck."

Sarah was inside. Delphine faltered in the foyer. Ghostly figures populated the home. Sheets covered furniture. Boxes taped shut littered the floor.

This was a dead space.

Sarah eyed her warily. "Doctor."

"Hello, Sarah," Delphine said softly, collecting herself. Sarah slipped her hands into the back pockets of her jeans. "You ready? The car's on the way."

"Marion's sending one of hers?" Cosima asked.

"I offered to drive us over. She's cagey, yeah, about handing out her home address. Ain't that a bloody laugh?"

Cosima fished her phone out. "Well. That's not really an obstacle these days."

Sarah eyed Cosima warily. "What you got there?"

"I think I'm about to run a super marathon," Cosima muttered, poking at her screen. "I better track my path."

Sarah smirked. "Shit, Cos."

Delphine observed quietly, mind zipping through frantic thoughts: that Marion's caginess surrounding her privacy likely derived from concerns for her daughter, that Sarah was compromised in that exact capacity with her daughter, that all of them lay exposed and that on this reasoning it could be said that turnabout was fair play.

But Delphine could only see an escalating game of oneupmanship where the stakes climbed ever higher.

Delphine stood uneasily in the home that encased her like another object stored in a museum shuttered. She eyed the shapes of furniture beneath the sheets. Sarah felt no compunction dropping into an uncovered chair in the kitchen. Cosima followed her lead, opening a discussion on Marion
Bowles's intentions. Delphine remained on her feet.

An itch settled in the back of Delphine's mind. She wanted to peek beneath the sheets. She wanted a glimpse at Beth Childs. What kind of existence Beth Childs inhabited. What set Beth Childs apart. What blended Beth Childs into the tableau of the faces of Project Leda.

Delphine kept her hands at her sides—and out of her pockets. She remembered the uproar. She wondered if Sarah was carrying a firearm. A glance at Sarah revealed no clues and seeing that Sarah and Cosima's soft discussion issued no invitation, Delphine lingered separate. When the doorbell rang, Delphine was closest to the door.

The suited figure beyond the door was Eric. His eyes, not hidden behind sunglasses, drilled into Delphine. "Dr. Cormier."

"Hello, Eric," she replied.

He cocked his head minutely. They'd never undergone introductions. "Are you alone?"

"No."

"I was told to expect Ms. Manning and Ms. Niehaus."

"Right here," Sarah said as she and Cosima came up behind Delphine. "Can we get going?"

Delphine sat aware of Cosima's phone during the ride and the invisible signal tracking their moving position. Sarah conducted an idle search of the limousine's compartments.

"What's the point of all this if there innit one drop of alcohol?" she concluded darkly.

Cosima grinned. "Make sure to tell Marion that. Maybe she'll deliver next time."

"There better not be a bloody next time," Sarah muttered. She glanced through the privacy window. "We're not lackeys at her beck and call, yeah?"

"There has to be something she wants to show you if she refused to talk over the phone," Cosima pointed out.

"Us," Sarah said absently. "Show us."

When they arrived, Eric did not demand that Sarah hand over any firearms, which Delphine understood to mean that Sarah was not carrying one. The door of the mansion opened before anyone set foot on the step, a small silhouette lit in the doorway.

"Hello," Charlotte called. After a little consideration, she added, "Welcome back."

"Hey, Charlotte," Cosima said brightly while Sarah and Delphine managed a more subdued, "Hello."

"Are you hungry?" Charlotte asked. "Dinner is ready."

"Dinner?" Sarah echoed with confusion, looking to Cosima. "No one said anything about dinner."

Charlotte looked unsure. "Mom told me to bring you to the table. It's all set."

"O . . . kay," Cosima volunteered for the three of them. "Why don't you show us the way?"
"Did Marion bloody Bowles bring us all the way out here to eat dinner?" Sarah asked lowly when Charlotte turned around in eager hospitality.

Cosima shrugged. "I guess we'll find out."

The dining table, positioned beneath an opulent chandelier, was set for five, a setting at the head of the table, two to the left of it and two to the right. Marion Bowles nodded at Delphine when the group entered the room, unsurprised to see her. The three guests lingered in the doorway while Charlotte made her way immediately to the chair to the right of the head of the table. Their hostess indicated the empty spots. "Please."

Charlotte tugged on her mother's hand. Dr. Bowles turned to her. "Yes, sweetie?"

The dulcet notes of her tone and the gentility of her manner edged the woman now before Delphine into the territory of simply Marion. In this moment, at least, the intimidation was absent.

Charlotte mumbled something that Marion had to bend to hear. Marion straightened up with a smile and said, "Why don't you ask?"

Charlotte glanced at their cluster and then back to her mother. Marion nodded. Charlotte stood up a little straighter and turned to them. "Could one of my sisters please sit next to me?"

Sarah and Cosima exchanged looks.

"Uh, yeah," Cosima said, "I will."

Which left Delphine to sit beside Sarah, who sat to Marion's left.

Staff appeared the moment everyone was seated. Hot towels were offered to wipe their hands. Water and wine were poured and shortly bowls of vegetable soup and small plates of salad were placed before them. Conversation was sparse, every adult aware of the child at the table. Sarah appeared particularly disturbed and it wasn't difficult to imagine that Sarah could envision Kira sitting in Charlotte's place, under the thumb of scientists. Delphine watched Charlotte to measure her appetite. Cosima engaged in a game of snuck glances with her young companion.

"Do you usually have dinner like this?" Cosima asked Charlotte.

"With Mom?" Charlotte asked, glancing at Marion. "Or with other people?"

"Yeah," Cosima said slowly. "Sure."

"Usually not with other people," Charlotte said, "but Mom says it's important to have dinner together."

"So you and your mom have dinner together a lot?" Cosima asked.

Charlotte nodded with her fork in her mouth. "A—"

"Finish chewing first, darling," Marion chided gently.

Charlotte nodded dutifully. When she'd swallowed, she peeked at Cosima. "Most nights."

"Yeah?" Cosima asked. "Is this what you usually eat? Do you like it?"

"We eat all sorts of things. Mom said that tonight we weren't going to eat meat because you don't eat meat."
Cosima's spoon halted. She nodded. "That's right."

"How come you don't eat meat?" Charlotte asked.

"Well," Cosima said, "there are a lot of reasons people don't eat meat. Some people think that it's better not to have meat in your diet. Some people don't eat meat for ethical reasons."

"Ethical?" Charlotte asked. "Like if it's the wrong thing or the right thing to do?"

Cosima grinned. "Exactly. Some people think it's wrong to eat meat, that it's wrong to kill other animals. Or they have nuanced objections. For example, they might not like how we keep and raise livestock. They consider the conditions inhumane."

"Inhumane?" Charlotte echoed.

"Like, uh, not good, not comfortable, not nice. Cruel, even." Cosima paused. "In terms of commercial production, they're right in most cases."

"Is that why you don't eat meat?"

Cosima smiled at the staff who removed her plate and bowl. "It's not strictly true that I don't eat meat. I eat certain types of meat sometimes."

"What kind?" Charlotte asked.

New plates emerged on which open bread buns bore a patty of some sort topped with a slaw and a white sauce. Cosima looked confused.

"The patty is made from chickpeas," Marion said. "The sauce is similar to tzatziki. Try it. It's very good. The chef has made improvements with every iteration."

"Has he?" Cosima asked drily.

"She has," Marion confirmed. "It's rare to achieve perfection with the first attempt."

Charlotte looked between her mother and Cosima. Charlotte's voice intruded softly. "But practice doesn't mean every time you get better."

Marion and Cosima turned to Charlotte. Marion nodded, lips curved into a small smile. "But practicing many times usually results in overall improvement."

Delphine wondered, from the way consternation sat on Cosima's and Sarah's brows, if the same thought crossed their minds that sat in hers: Charlotte's leg.

Dinner resumed. It was strange to Delphine to sit in that opulence, beneath the clarity of the glass in the chandelier, and use her hands to pick up what looked like a hamburger.

But Charlotte approached the task with gusto, sauce clinging to the edges of her mouth and dripping onto her fingers. When she licked at them, Marion raised a silent eyebrow in her direction. Charlotte meekly wiped her fingers on a napkin. Marion didn't refrain either, though she took daintier bites. Delphine noted that Sarah and Cosima were contrasts as well. Sarah chewed with the vigor of someone who found the meal a task and wanted to be through it quickly. Cosima ate not unlike Charlotte, if more restrained, but no less appreciative. The two exchanged smiles around mouthfuls.

"You didn't say what meat you eat," Charlotte said to Cosima.
"Chicken," Cosima said. "I like the taste."

"But what about what you said? You said people who said the conditions were bad were right."

Cosima nodded, wiping her mouth. "Yeah. It's an issue rooted at the institutional level, which means it's hard to fight as a single consumer. You can make conscious choices, like what farms you'll buy from. Some farms make an effort to raise their livestock well."

"How can you always be sure you're eating chicken that was treated well?"

Cosima shook her head. "You can't. Not until the whole system changes."

"How do you change the system?"

Cosima glanced at Marion. "That's the real question." She smiled at Charlotte. "The idea of eating less chicken—or no chicken—and buying from this farmer versus that farmer is supposed to put pressure on the industry to change in some way. But that only really works if a lot of people do it at the same time."

Charlotte ruminated through a bite. "Not a lot of people do it?"

"Not enough," Cosima said.

Charlotte wiped her hands. "Is there another way? One that wouldn't take a lot of people?"

Cosima nodded. "The government can pass laws that say that farms have to create certain conditions and meet criteria. Those are called regulations."

"Why don't they do that?"

Cosima smiled. "The farmers wouldn't like it. It would make it more expensive for them to raise chickens, which means they make less money selling chickens."

"Then how do things change?"

"One way or another," Cosima said. "Circumstances will probably work in different ways to make change happen in ways we might see and ways we might not. Maybe opinion will change and so demand will change, or something goes wrong catastrophically and so something has to change to make it safe or to fix the industry's or the product's reputation. It'll change because change is what happens. Change is what made the industry what it is today. Whether the next change will be a change we like or don't like remains to be seen."

Charlotte gazed at Cosima solemnly. "Mom says that we're part of a change."

Cosima nodded. "I think we could be."

"In a good way or a bad way?" Charlotte pressed.

"I don't know if we can say yet," Cosima posed carefully.

"So you can't say if we're a bad thing?" Charlotte asked.

Cosima took a sip of water and then turned in her seat to better face Charlotte, putting one forearm on the table and propping the other on the back of her chair. "Nature doesn't really make evolutionary choices because they're 'good' or 'bad.' Nature doesn't have that type of—moral consciousness. We see changes in nature over time because of—" Cosima shook her head and spun
her hands around each other. "—accidents and opportunity. It's pragmatic and it's chance. Changes happen in the environment that privileges an adaptation. Or this firefly got eaten, so this other firefly had the chance to mate and pass on its genes. You know, it—it happens." Cosima was quiet. "You and me and Sarah—we—we didn't just happen."

Charlotte's mouth verged on a frown. "Mom says that there are dogs and plants that aren't accidents. That we made them that way."

Cosima nodded in concession. "Yeah. Through selective breeding. Which has an element of chance and unexpected surprises and accidents because we don't get to see how all the genes interact. Today, we have better technology that makes the process, uh, more precise. Less of an accident."

"Like us."

"Right," Cosima said slowly, coming to the reluctant realization that Charlotte was flanking her.

"I don't feel like a bad thing," Charlotte said.

Cosima smiled with an edge of uncertainty. "Well, you're not responsible for the fact that you exist."

"That's what Mom says. She says I'm responsible for my actions."

"Right."

The staff appeared to clear the plates again, letting Cosima resume a proper seat. Delphine studied the man and woman. She wondered if this was their regular assignment. If they daily oversaw meals. How often they'd seen Marion and Charlotte sit down to meals. How often they witnessed guests entertained at this table. Who those guests were. What they did. What they discussed. If they knew at this moment that a clone was speaking to a younger genetic copy of herself while from across the table another clone looked on with increasing unease.

The final dish was crème brûlée, which prompted Charlotte to shoot a furtive look at her mother.

"Next time," Marion said gently.

"Next time what?" Cosima queried their young companion.

Charlotte smiled. "I can help Chef blowtorch the sugar on top."

*

At the conclusion of the meal, Marion excused herself and Charlotte. "I'll be back in a moment. Would anyone care for coffee or a digestif?"

The guests declined. When they were alone, Sarah assessed her clone, who stared off after mother and daughter with brow-dimpling concentration. "Yeah, I don't know what to make of that, either." Cosima smirked at Sarah. "Actually, I was wondering if I was like that at her age—if I'd be as unfazed if someone had let me in on the secret."

Sarah eyed her. "You're like that now, Cos."

"Hey, I'm not uncritical," Cosima protested. "Shady shit went down to make us happen."

"As long as you remember that," Sarah said. As an afterthought, Sarah glanced at Delphine. Delphine held her gaze squarely.
Marion returned without fanfare.

"Thank you for joining us for dinner," Marion said. "I didn't want Charlotte to have to eat alone and I wasn't sure how long it would take to conclude our business."

"What is our business?" Sarah asked tetchily.

"Let me show you," Marion said. She indicated for them to follow her. They stood and shuffled out in a cluster with Marion setting the pace through the halls. "Are you aware of the genesis of Project Leda?"

Sarah glanced at Cosima. Cosima spread her hands. "You mean Susan and Ethan Duncan?"

Marion nodded absently. "Yes. Originally, the military recruited them and funded their research."

"But even the military thought they went too far and pulled out," Sarah chimed in. "That's when DYAD stepped in. Duncan told me."

Marion nodded. "I believe that Ethan Duncan believes that. But the military never shut down Project Leda. Rather, it splintered into two autonomous operations. DYAD carried the female clones to term. The military faction retained a male line."

"Male line?" Cosima said. She waved her hands as if to disperse a haze of smoke. "Wait. Wait. Are you saying that the military didn't have any actual ethical objections to cloning, it's that we were the wrong sex?"

"It's possible that the military's preference for males is what caused the formation of two separate projects, yes, but I can't say. My knowledge was limited to the rumors of a parallel undertaking that circulated for years," Marion said. "I heard them but did little more than file them away as interesting. Whether or not it was true, we had our interest well in development. The military is its own machine."

"You mean you can't control 'em," Sarah said.

Marion nodded, unfazed and matter-of-fact. "Our influence doesn't extend over them. But they are unquestionably an institution of innovation. War requires ingenuity and conducting war requires functioning soldiers—which means enhancing their deficiencies—and fixing the broken ones who come back."

"Jesus," Sarah muttered.

"Why didn't you try to confirm their existence following the loss of the synthetic sequences?" Cosima asked.

"To what end?" Marion asked. "To ask to poach their research? The military is more jealous of its secrets and research and development than we are—until they unleash their breakthroughs."

"Like you, except without the drive for profits," asserted Sarah.

"I wasn't criticizing their prerogative and methods," Marion said. "But make no mistake: the technology derived from military research certainly provides profits."

Sarah wore her wariness openly.

"If you didn't care about the rumors before," Cosima interjected, "you sound like you do now?"
Cosima's question prompted a nod from their hostess as they passed through yet another archway and into another hall, past another posted sentry. "Supposing there were two clone projects, they appeared to have no interest in Project Leda and we were far more consumed with the logistics of tracking Leda's dispersed subjects. With neither project interfering with the other, there was no pressing concern to seek them out."

"You're saying the situation has changed," Cosima hazarded.

"Yes. And fortune put Sarah and Siobhan Sadler in my path. Their aid expedited the process."


Delphine studied Marion with a growing sense of foreboding. "Dr. Bowles, where are you taking us? What do you want to show us?"

Marion descended a set of curving stairs. "There were indications that an outside party was attempting to gain access to Leda subjects."

"The Proletheans were," Sarah said.

"Yes," Marion said. "I'd thought the same, as did Aldous. The matter was left in his hands. But then we obtained footage."

"Footage?" Cosima asked.

"Of a culprit," Marion said, reaching the final step. "This is Project Castor."

There was only one thing to see: the man in the separate observation room who smiled at the sight of them through the glass. It wasn't the scar down his cheek that made Delphine uneasy, but the overeagerness of his eyes as he approached the window as they approached him.

"I know him," Sarah said.

"Say what?" Cosima said. "You know him?"

Sarah shook her head. "No, no. I met a guy with his face—without the scar."

Cosima's eyebrows shot up. "So. It's real, then. This is another set of clones."

Sarah shrugged. "Or he's got a twin brother."

"Or two twin brothers," interjected Marion in a mild manner. "Triplets, in that case."

They glanced over at their host. Sarah asked, "You saw another one?"

"He wasn't alone," Marion said, referring to the man in the room. "However, we failed to apprehend his accomplice."

"How did you apprehend this one?" Cosima asked.

Marion appeared to mull on an answer, eyes considering the man intently watching all of them. Delphine processed that the room in which the man was held appeared built for containment, that this chamber existed in the same building in which Marion Bowles and her daughter passed days and nights.
"He was attempting to kidnap a subject of Project Leda," Marion said at last. "For what purpose we haven't been able to determine. He has yet to provide so much as a name."

They contemplated the captive as a collective. He grinned—leered—at his audience. With a shrug, Cosima raised her phone, said, "Smile," and snapped pictures of the prisoner's face.

"Why'd you do that?" Sarah asked.

"Because we should all know what he looks like," Cosima said, "so that everyone can keep an eye out."

Sarah nodded.

"Sarah," ventured Delphine hesitantly, "where did you meet the other lookalike?"

"You mean clone?" Sarah corrected.

Cosima smirked. "So we're accepting that there's a line of male clones?"

"I was also hesitant to give credence to the myth," Marion said, "but I now feel confident in declaring it a bona fide project."

"He was a Prolethean," Sarah said.

"The clone was Prolethean?" Marion said. "To be sure we're on the same page, we're speaking of the fundamentalist religious sect?"

"You know 'em?" Sarah asked archly.

"They've been a thorn in Aldous Leekie's side for some time," Marion said. "Are you saying a Castor clone ranked among their members?"

"These Proletheans were different," Sarah said. "Like you—with DYAD and Neolution and Topside—they seem to have differences of opinion. I don't know if this Castor was a Prolethean or a spy."

Marion looked confused. "What interest could a religious sect offer the military?"

Sarah spread her hands. "You're the one running a conspiracy—you tell me what the other side of the conspiracy wants."

By the slant of her lips, Marion Bowles couldn't. Marion eyed the Castor subject. "He asked to speak to you, Sarah."

"About bloody what?" gasped Sarah.

"I don't know," Marion said. "He won't say. He insists he'll speak only to you."

"Well, I don't have any bloody interest," Sarah fumed. "Is that why you brought me here?"

A softness around Marion's eyes conveyed a consideration. "If you'd been inclined to speak to him, yes. Primarily I wanted you to see him and to discuss what this may mean and possible next steps moving forward. If you wish to speak to him, you're welcome to."

"While you listen in, right?" Sarah asked.
"And watch," Marion added, unperturbed, "for your protection. He killed some of the men who thwarted the kidnapping."

That silenced the room. Cosima placed her hands on her hips and made casual eye contact with the scarred face smirking at her. "I assume you took blood and tissue samples from him?"

"Yes."

"Any chance we could get a look at that?" Cosima asked.

Marion nodded. The gesture betrayed a sliver of fatigue. "Come. Let's discuss."

* *

The sitting room fanned them out in the same arrangement they'd assumed during their previous visit. Marion offered tea, coffee, liquor, water, and whatever a pantry might hold. Cosima and Delphine declined. Sarah requested bourbon.

"Is neat acceptable?" asked Marion.

Sarah shrugged and said, droll, "Even better."

Marion poured the drink herself.

Delphine spoke up as Marion passed the tumbler to Sarah. "Considering that there was a kidnapping attempt of a Leda subject and that this man was capable of killing security agents, I find it difficult to believe that security is not your top concern."

"The laboratory will be secure," Marion said, taking her seat.

"I mean outside of the laboratory," Delphine said. "I assume the target of the kidnapping attempt was not in a laboratory setting."

"She wasn't," Marion confirmed. She looked to Sarah and Cosima. "A security detail can be assembled."

"Of your people?" scoffed Sarah. "No, thanks."

"Cosima?" Marion queried.

"Uh, yeah, no," Cosima said slowly.

Marion said, "Alternatively, a secure residence could be established to house and protect all parties—somewhere remote, say."

"What, you mean we live like this?" Sarah said, smirking. The tumbler dangled in the practiced grip of her fingertips. "Under a rock and with you holding the lock and key? Sounds like a prison."

"I'm presenting options," Marion said.

"Where's the option where this all goes away and we get to live our lives?" demanded Sarah.

"For some," Marion said mildly, "there's a matter of preserving those lives first."

Sarah's jaw stiffened. "We're here to talk about that, yeah?"
"If you have no objections to remaining in the city, the laboratory is ready," Marion declared mildly. "We can proceed when you're ready."

"What about Professor Duncan's safety?" Delphine asked. "We don't know what Castor wants or what their intentions were in trying to take a Leda subject. What if they learn of Professor Duncan and his knowledge?"

"Arrangements can be made for Professor Duncan," Marion said.

"You mean give you custody of him?" Sarah asked. "No."

Marion spread her hands at Delphine. "There it is."

"But there are other Castor subjects out there," tried Delphine feebly.

Marion nodded. "Yes."

"What is your plan regarding them?" Delphine asked.

Marion shook her head vaguely. "I don't know yet. We are at the beginning of assessing the situation and determining their motivations and intentions."

"Christ," Sarah muttered.

Marion inclined her head. "A rudimentary physical assessment seems to put his age around yours. If Project Leda and Project Castor share the same origins, we have to ask why Project Castor has made contact with Project Leda only now? What would they gain by taking a Leda subject?"

Cosima nodded distractedly. "We'll have access to their genetic material, right? We can see if they were made in a process similar to the one used to stabilize our genetic sequence."

Sarah covered her eyes. "That's never gonna sound normal."

Cosima waved her off. "Marion—er, Dr. Bowles is right. They have to want something from us. Why else would he want to talk to you, Sarah? Look, we're sick. Right? If they were made using the same process—the same synthetic sequences—they might be sick, too."

Delphine's brow contracted. "But many signs indicate that the development of the polyps originate in the reproductive organs—the uterus and the ovaries. These aren't traits a Castor subject would necessarily share."

"Yeah, but if our reproductive organs are compromised," Cosima posed, "maybe theirs are, too."

"What," Sarah interjected, "you want to give him a prostate exam?"

Cosima spread her hands. "I wouldn't be against it if I knew for sure he wouldn't rip my arms off."

Marion smiled briefly, meeting Cosima's eyes. "I'll have samples provided to you. Should you need anything, ask."

"How?" Cosima said.

"You'll be introduced to the head of security at the laboratory who will also act as liaison. Inform him of your needs and he will relay them to me."

"Don't call you, in other words," drawled Sarah.
"Regarding small matters, yes," Marion said, "but we should remain on the same page regarding threats that affect all of us—for the benefit of all."

Sarah waved an arm with the lackluster of her weariness. "Is that what you brought us here to say? We have to work together now—because that worked well with DYAD, yeah? Because Leekie kept his promises and everything worked out alright? You show us some boy clone and we're supposed to follow your lead? What's that worth to me, eh? All I've gained here is the additional knowledge that my family isn't safe—maybe even less safe than I thought they were!"

Marion shifted her weight to lean upon the armrest. "Yes. That would have been true whether you learned of it or not. I believed that you needed to see this. When we start to pull at this thread, I don't know what will happen. And . . . Charlotte was excited at the idea that you might join us for dinner."

The mention of Charlotte prompted Sarah to cover her mouth and glance about the room. "You gonna keep us in the loop?"

Marion nodded. "Yes. It would behoove all of us to get to the bottom of this matter quickly."

Sarah eyed Marion warily. "You were hoping I'd talk to him."

Marion nodded. "Yes. But I won't force you to, Sarah."

"But I'm gonna bloody have to, aren't I?" Sarah muttered.

"To be honest," Marion said, "I doubt he plans to say anything worthwhile, but I was hoping he might betray something inadvertently."

"Jeez, lady, is there anything that's not a game to you?" Sarah huffed.

"None of this is a game to me, Sarah," Marion said.

"The lab," Cosima chimed in, "is it staffed?"

Marion leaned back in her chair. "Do you need it staffed?"

"I want to bring someone with me. A technician."

"The young man who currently works with you?" Marion asked. "Scott Smith?"

The name made Cosima stiffen. She nodded slowly. "Yes."

"I have no objection to that," Marion declared. "Additional staff can be found, if you need specific skills or extra hands."

Cosima's expression, however, broadcast reservations. "No . . . I think we're good."

"I have a question," Delphine said, leaning forward. "Who are the Neolutionists and how are they a faction within the DYAD? I thought Neolution was fringe pop science that plucked supporters from the mainstream, like laymen, not so much from the serious scientific community itself. That it was harmless, not . . . systematically organized. That was the impression I got from the way Aldous presented it."

Cosima looked over sharply in Delphine's direction, but whatever comment sat on her tongue stayed trapped behind her lips.

"Neolution is a movement," Marion said, "that had serious thinkers and ambitions in years past, but I
had thought their influence and their attraction had waned and been subsumed into the glitzier fads like body modifications. If the movement is resurging in a more serious fashion, we'll have to be on alert."

"But Aldous openly professes his Neolution beliefs," Delphine said. "He published a book! How could you not be aware of Neolution within the DYAD?"

Marion smiled tightly. "Aldous is a far more extravagant dreamer than an inspired researcher. Though that would be the perfect facade."

"Did you know he set fire to the Duncans' lab?" Delphine asked.

Marion nodded offhandedly. "It was known to us."

"And you left him in that position?" Delphine wondered.

"Topside did not establish the DYAD," Marion said. "We stepped in at a point in time when its existence was threatened with financial failure and set the company back on its feet. This was, as might come as no surprise to you, after the Duncans' departure. What was done was done and Aldous Leekie was the pointman maintaining Project Leda. However, the DYAD had overstretched itself to maintain observation over its many dispersed subjects and was set to collapse. We diversified and expanded the breadth of its research and filled the labs with staff across a spectrum of disciplines. Project Leda is the DYAD asset Topside is primarily interested in, but it has since provided much more fruit besides."

"So you left Leekie as the director," murmured Delphine.

"He had intimate knowledge of the details and the framework, so . . . yes. More importantly, he proved manageable. Perhaps not the ideal manager, but not one who gave us much trouble. It helps that his staff—his research staff—is competent."

Cosima raised an eyebrow. "No comment on the monitors?"

"Yeah," Sarah scoffed, "like—what was his name—he had a tail—"

"I never got to see that," Cosima said, a bit of excitement coloring her tone.

"Yeah, well, be glad you didn't," Sarah assured Cosima. "I wish I didn't have the memory."

"We try not to micromanage," Marion said in a mild manner.

"Maybe you should have, yeah?" Sarah snapped back.

"We're investors," Marion said, coolly, unprovoked. "Our practice isn't to dictate or impose restrictions upon the science but to provide the financial means to ensure space and time so that it might develop and realize its potential. Ideally our interference is never needed."

"So, to use science terms because you seem comfortable with that," Sarah said, "you haven't given places like the DYAD regular checkups and now maybe this Neolution thing is stage four cancer eating up this company and your precious investment."

"I wouldn't have put it that way," Marion said, "but I certainly hope that's not the case."

"It was probably that kind of thinking that brought us here today," Sarah remarked.

Marion's eyebrow darted up minutely and then her gaze flicked to the side. They followed Marion's
line of sight to the open archway. Delphine saw nothing but Marion called out, "Charlotte?"

Nothing moved or appeared for a tense interlude, but soon the diminutive form in a nightgown shuffled in with her head bowed and her hands behind her back.

"Love," Marion said, "you're supposed to be in bed."

Charlotte nodded at the floor.

"What are you doing down here?"

Charlotte, head still bowed, shrugged.

"Michel didn't tell you to go back to bed?"

Charlotte replied in a voice so soft that it rendered her response unintelligible.

"What was that?" Marion asked.

Charlotte raised her head bashfully. "Michel didn't see me."

"Michel didn't see you?" Marion repeated with amazement. "Michel, who is most certainly standing around the corner?"

Charlotte fidgeted. "I was sneaky."

"Sneaky, hm?" Marion said, leaning forward. "That's not very good. That means anyone who is sneaky can get past Michel. Which means that Michel is not good at his job."

Charlotte's mouth twitched uncomfortably.

Marion sat back. "I guess I'll have to look for someone who can do Michel's job better."

Panic crept into Charlotte's features. "But Michel is good at his job."

"Not if he didn't see you."

Charlotte frowned and her lips parted and closed, parted and closed. "I—"

Marion raised a brow.

"I asked him not to say anything," Charlotte said.

"Why?" Marion asked.

"Because I wanted to see Sarah and Cosima," Charlotte said. She shifted her weight between her feet. "I wanted to say good night. I didn't—I didn't get to say good night."


Marion raised a brow.

"I asked him not to say anything," Charlotte said.

"Why?" Marion asked.

"Because I wanted to see Sarah and Cosima," Charlotte said. She shifted her weight between her feet. "I wanted to say good night. I didn't—I didn't get to say good night."


Charlotte nodded.

"Okay," Marion said softly. "Say good night and we'll go back up to bed."

"Hey," Cosima chimed in, "why don't I—or we—" Cosima amended, glancing at Sarah. "—go upstairs with you so that your mom doesn't have to take the trouble?"
"Really?" Charlotte said, looking to her mother.

Delphine would have said that Marion looked less than pleased. "Would you like that?"

Charlotte nodded meekly.

Marion released a prolonged, silent exhalation. "Then ask politely."

Charlotte pivoted to face Cosima. "Would you please come upstairs and—and say good night?"


Sarah hesitated but said, "Yeah. Alright."

"You have to show us the way," Cosima said as she got to her feet. Sarah followed in a more sedate air. "Do you have any rocking bedtime stories you like to read?"

"I have a dollhouse," Charlotte said brightly as she led them away, their voices fading with distance.

Marion and Delphine remained behind. Delphine surveyed Marion's expression where there sat the opacity Delphine associated with Dr. Bowles. But there was a hint of resignation.

"They are not so different, Cosima and Sarah," Delphine said with some hesitation. "They are both . . . stubborn."

"Survivors." The corners of Marion's mouth stretched tight briefly. "Aldous had no idea what he had on his hands."

Delphine had no idea what to make of Marion's statement. Whether Marion meant Cosima or Sarah or someone or something else altogether. Delphine sucked at her lips. "The discovery of this military component honestly doesn't trouble you? That Castor . . . he appears to be a soldier. I assume they are all soldiers?"

Marion drummed her fingers upon the armrest. "They were trying to take their target alive."

Delphine's brow crashed under the weight of incredulity. "For what purpose?"

"I don't know," murmured Marion.

"You think they didn't mean her harm? They could have been taking her elsewhere to harm her. Away from eyes and discovery."

"That's possible," Marion agreed without a hint of perturbation.

"But you don't think so?" Delphine asked.

"I don't see . . . anger in their actions," Marion said carefully. "Not like the Proletheans. I've seen what the Proletheans left behind in their wake. Theirs was a crusade, an attempt to eradicate an abomination. This . . . I struggle to determine why Castor would move now. What their motive could be." Marion glanced at Delphine. "Castor wasn't run like Leda. All the evidence I've seen depicts a self-aware force. The man we're holding doesn't seem the least bit surprised or unnerved by anything he's seen or that he's imprisoned. He gives off an impression almost as if . . . he's waiting." Marion stared at no particular point. "He knew of Sarah Manning. That leads me to suspect that recent developments spurred this interference." Marion's eyebrows twitched. "I have reason to believe they've been surveilling Leda for some time, so the question is why they'd make direct contact—now or at all. Is it something Sarah has done? But, if so, why go after a different subject unassociated with
Sarah?"

Delphine frowned. "What do you think of Cosima's hypothesis that Castor may be ill?"

"At this point I'm not disposed to discount anything. That would be troubling in a different capacity, however. If Leda and Castor spawn from the same source of methodology, my assumption would have started with Castor remaining in possession of the synthetic sequences that we lost. If that's true and the Castor line is exhibiting illness, then it may be that they've failed to determine the cause." Marion frowned behind a hand. "That would not bode well for our prospects."

"Have you examined him?" Delphine asked.

"Not thoroughly."

"Will you?" Delphine wondered.

"Would you?" countered Marion.

Delphine hesitated. "I would."

Marion's mouth flirted with a smile.

Delphine frowned. "How does Sarah fit into this picture?"

Marion regarded Delphine with a look that held a shrug. "Sarah is different."

"Then why not go after Sarah?"

"Like I said," Marion said.

Delphine shook her head. "Yet you're hoping Sarah will unite with you against a common enemy?"

Marion smiled. Delphine could see the logic but not a high possibility of success.

"You won't take greater security measures?" Delphine asked.

"They don't want it," Marion said. "As you witnessed."

They sat in locked gazes. Marion was inscrutable.

"What will happen when Cosima and I leave the DYAD?" Delphine asked.

"We'll see," Marion said.

A thought struck Delphine. Her lips parted as she digested it. "You mean that literally, don't you? This will be an opportunity to see if anyone comes after us. We're bait to expose them."

Marion did not respond, gaze steady on Delphine. Delphine peered back, trying to penetrate the veil of Marion's thoughts. She uncovered nothing. Delphine asked, "How can you keep him in your own home? How can you sleep knowing he's not far from you?"

"I wanted to keep him in the most secure and private quarters I knew." Marion waved a hand. "This is the most secure and private facility I know."

Delphine stared at her. Marion smiled.

"If I don't go up there," Marion said, "Charlotte will detain them all night. Would you like to join me
on the task of imposing bedtime?"

Delphine leaned back into the chair. "Would it hurt to give them a few more minutes?"

Marion raised an eyebrow. "I suppose it wouldn't."

On their way back to the city, gauging Cosima's level of thoughtfulness to be distractedly high and Sarah's unease to be cautiously low, Delphine asked after their time with Charlotte.

Cosima smirked. "She brought up the ethics of eating meat again, strung me around a bit, and then asked me why we couldn't just eat lab-grown tissue." Cosima shook her head. "She'd had that up her sleeve the whole time but waited until she'd seen me flail a bit to lay it down."

"How does she know about cultured meat?" wondered Delphine.

"How else? Her mom told her." Cosima's lower lip jutted out. "She's smart."

"No surprise." Delphine glanced between Cosima and Sarah. "The baseline seems set high."

"Yeah, well, Marion is giving her an education I can't imagine having," Cosima said. "I try to imagine myself her age and taking all of this in—"

"She seems like a curious and—" Delphine chose her next word carefully, "—content child. Her circumstances don't appear to disturb her."

"Because that's the only reality she's ever known," Cosima said.

"Is that a bad thing?" Delphine countered.

"I wouldn't want it for my kid," Sarah muttered darkly. Delphine eyed the gathering storm upon Sarah's expression. "It's not right. None of it's right."

Delphine's phone buzzed in her pocket. She glanced at the screen, moved to reflexively slip the device back into her pocket, and then hesitated, the message registering.

From Shay [23:02]: Heading to bed. Good night. :) 

Delphine glanced at her companions. Cosima eyed her, but with cursory interest. Sarah sat peering with shelved brow out the windows.

To Shay [23:03]: I didn't realize how late it was. I hope you had a good day. Good night. 
From Shay [23:04]: It was a day. Nothing horrible. Nothing great. 
To Shay [23:05]: It wasn't great to have breakfast with me? 
From Shay [23:07]: Was it great for you? 
To Shay [23:08]: Yes. I wish I could repeat the experience. 
From Shay [23:08]: You will. 
To Shay [23:09]: Promise? 
From Shay [23:10]: I'm not sure that's something that needs a promise. 
From Shay [23:10]: It's highly likely to happen w/ or w/o a promise. 
To Shay [23:11]: Likely but not certain. It feels certain with a promise. 
From Shay [23:12]: lol. Ok. Promise. 
From Shay [23:14]: U too. Remember to get some sleep. I hope you don't have trouble getting to
sleep tonight. Good night.

Delphine lowered her phone to discover herself under observation. Cosima lifted an eyebrow in question. Delphine was struck with the self-consciousness that she was smiling. Broadly.

Delphine smoothed her expression and nodded in acknowledgement. Cosima obscured a smirk behind her hand.

The darkened face of the Childs residence hailed the limousine's late-night return. The desolate structure exuded a disconsolate air. Its bleak solitude rendered the memory of the reclusive Bowles residence welcoming in retrospect. Even Eric—their chauffeur once again—glanced suspiciously at the edifice.

Opening the back door, Eric leaned over and said, "Dr. Bowles forgot to mention this, but she thinks it would be wise for her to meet with Professor Duncan—in the setting of your choice. She wishes Professor Duncan to feel comfortable moving forward. Is that acceptable?"

Delphine looked to Cosima and Sarah, who consulted each other through silent gazes.

"Alright," allowed Sarah. "It'll have to be set up."

"It can take place at the laboratory, if that would be the most convenient," Eric said.

"You mean the new secret lab?" Cosima asked. "That'd be great, except we have no idea where the lab is."

Eric nodded. "We'll be in contact soon. Be prepared to move quickly." He stepped back to indicate they could exit. They clambered out one after another. Closing the door, Eric said, "Good night."

"How about goodbye?" Sarah mused. "What's the chance of this being goodbye for good?"

"The odds aren't worth betting on, Ms. Manning," Eric said.

Sarah looked too tired to spare the energy for a glare. She shook her head and waved him off as if to indicate "get out of here."

Delphine hoped the twilight masked the twitch of her lips.

When they were alone, Sarah looked to Cosima, "Need a lift home?"

Cosima glanced at Delphine. "Yeah, sure."

"Alright, c'mon," Sarah said, turning toward the truck. "Bye, doc."

"Sarah?" Delphine called.

Sarah stopped and turned.

"You're not armed today?" Delphine asked.

"What's it matter to you?" Sarah demanded.

Delphine shook her head. "I was just wondering since—since no one had to take away your—your gun."
Sarah glanced around, as if someone might be listening. Chances were more likely than in the case of an average person that someone might be. "Yeah, well, figured I could save myself the trouble this time," She licked her lips, eyebrows leaping. "But it's around." Delphine glanced at the vehicle. Sarah smirked. "Yeah."

Delphine moistened her lips. "How . . . You didn't mention how you acquired it."

Sarah tilted her head. "Why, lookin' to narc me out, doc?"

Sarah didn't sound at all threatened. Not even amused. Delphine floundered in silence, unable to bring her inquiry to the point. Condescension seized Sarah's lips in a vicious smile. Cosima stared hard at Delphine, eyes narrowed in concentration.

"I . . . I was just curious," managed Delphine.

"Just curious," Sarah repeated, grin slipping into amused. She had canines like Cosima. "Not like your medical bag is missing a handy tool?"

Delphine pressed her lips together. In the ambient light, she and Sarah held a long, examining look. Sarah broke the impasse with a nod. Turning to Cosima, Sarah lifted her chin. "Let's go, Cos."

"I'll see you tomorrow," Cosima said to Delphine, a frown dangling at the edges of her mouth.

Delphine nodded, uncertain what her expression bore. "Good night."

The walk to her car impressed a sense of loneliness compounded by the receding counterpoint of Cosima's and Sarah's footsteps. As Delphine sat behind the wheel, heat blasting, the truck's headlights pierced the night and departed first, leaving Delphine to gaze in solitude at the home of the late Beth Childs. It appeared hollow. It left Delphine feeling hollowed.

Delphine needed directions. Her phone's GPS pinpointed her location and as the dot zoomed in tight upon her coordinates on the map, Delphine remembered. Cosima had done the same to Marion Bowles.

The most private residence in the estimation of Marion Bowles was now a little less private. Regardless of Marion's awareness of the disclosure. If such privacy had ever existed. It hadn't for the subjects of Project Leda. Delphine herself had likely forfeited the luxury.

Could Delphine ask someone to sacrifice the same?

Would she have to?

The map app prompted Delphine for a destination. 494 Claremont St sat near the top of the entries in the history of recent addresses.

Who else might Delphine lead to Shay's doorstep? Could Delphine keep herself away to prevent the possibility?

The only sure answer Delphine possessed was that she would not be arriving on Shay's doorstep that night. With a sigh Delphine set a course for her home and eased off the curb onto the desolate street.
Chapter 44

Delphine breakfasted in the company of only the voices emanating from the television speakers and a text response from Shay returning Delphine's wish of a good morning.

To Shay [07:03]: Was it a jogging, yoga, or meditation today?
From Shay [07:05]: Yoga. Needed a good stretch.
To Shay [07:06]: Why? Are you stiff or sore?
From Shay [07:07]: Little bit. Told u that u have to run very fast in winter.

Delphine smiled. She typed, *There are other activities to warm you up.* Her thumb twitched toward the send button but paused mid-descent.

A review of the words led to their deletion and the substitution of the more humdrum *I hope you feel better.*

But the digital exchange fell short of having Shay present and the simple pleasure of sharing the same space. Delphine liked watching Shay move about, the purposeful and mindful attention she paid to tasks and the comfort of a guest, the projection of patience and unhurriedness from her person, the outlines of routine expanded to accommodate Delphine. Contemplating Shay the previous morning had provided an unexpected respite, a sidestepping of the anxieties and anticipation of what the day would entail and require, and Delphine wanted to recapture the carefree hour—or recreate it in its entirety.

The desire felt selfish and irresponsible.

Nonetheless into the trunk of her car Delphine deposited a garment bag containing a spare suit.

Should she need an outfit on short notice in the future.

At the lab, Delphine passed time watching Cosima glance at her phone, consumed with anticipation that the silent device would come to life. The nervous energy from Cosima's sector infected Scott with a case of fidgets while Delphine resisted the onslaughts of tedium and uncertainty.

Cosima kicked back in her chair, hitting the limit of its recline. "Why do you think they let Leekie be Rachel's guardian?"

"What do you mean?" Delphine asked.

Cosima, head lolling against the top of the chair, graced Delphine with a bland expression. "I mean look at Charlotte and look at Rachel."

"I'm still unclear as to what you mean," Delphine said.

Cosima rolled her eyes. "Do you think that Charlotte is going to turn out to have the same disposition as Rachel?"

Delphine hesitated. "You don't think so."

Cosima threw up her hands, as if the answer were obvious and self-evident.

"There's nothing to indicate that conclusion without a doubt," Delphine hedged. "They are subject to very similar influences."
"Except, well—" Cosima started and stopped.

"Except what?" Delphine prompted.

"Like," Cosima said slowly, "actual care and nurture."

"Nurture," Delphine mused. "You don't think Aldous nurtured Rachel?"

Cosima held up her palms to stonewall Delphine. "Wait. Let's define 'nurture' here. I'm not saying that Leekie didn't, like, provide for Rachel and oversee her day-to-day needs and education and whatnot—I assume he saw to all that."

Delphine nodded, not confirming—because she had no idea either—but not challenging Cosima's assertion.

Cosima continued, "I'm saying that he didn't, like . . ."

Delphine raised an eyebrow.

Cosima shook her head. "I don't know if he made sure to have dinner with her, or invited over her clone sisters because she wanted to meet them, or gave her an elaborate dollhouse filled with figurines she could name after those sisters, or tucked her into bed at night."

Delphine played the scenarios through her mind. "I think those were things he could have done with Rachel."

She and Cosima locked gazes.

"The privilege and opportunities that Dr. Bowles affords Charlotte are the same that Aldous likely provided Rachel," reasoned Delphine. "It is the same with the degree of self-awareness that Rachel and Charlotte have." Delphine eyed Cosima. "However, it's not the actions you are contesting."

Cosima covered her mouth with a hand, eyes brooding. "You think Leekie loved Rachel?"

Delphine noted the past tense, but shrugged at Cosima's question. "Do you think Dr. Bowles loves Charlotte?"

Cosima pivoted the chair away but remained fixed on Delphine with her eyes. "Would it even matter if she did? Project Leda is still Project Leda. What they did is still fucked up. That Charlotte exists because they refused to stop trying is fucked up."

Scott, silent during the exchange, peered warily in Cosima's direction.

Delphine sucked at her lips. "Growing up, if you had been aware of your nature and circumstances as Charlotte is, do you think you would have the same opinion?"

Cosima served Delphine a dose of side-eye. "If I had been raised in Neolution, I'd have been conditioned to think a certain way. That's what it is, Delphine—conditioning. And I still might not agree with them."

"That is the nature of any socialization," Delphine argued. "And, since socialization is constructed, it can be defied and deconstructed, as you said."

Cosima swiveled to face Delphine directly. "I'm not sure what you're trying to argue here. Are you saying that being a self-aware experiment is a good thing or a bad thing?"
"For Rachel and Charlotte, it's a state that . . . simply is." Delphine attempted to eradicate any trace of aggression from her regard and tone. "You are the one suggesting a distinction between their experiences."

"And you pointed out that maybe there isn't a distinction." Cosima leaned back in her chair with a smirk. "So we just traded hands back and forth until we wound up where we started."

"Hands?"

"Like card hands. Poker hands."

Delphine nodded, though she knew that poker involved no exchanges of cards between players. "Okay. Yes?"

Cosima squinted at her. "I don't get you."

"What do you mean?" Delphine asked, wary.

"Are you against what DYAD does? Are you for what DYAD does? It's like sometimes your argument lines up to condemn them, some other time you sound like you're on their side—"

"Are the only options complete acceptance or total rejection?" countered Delphine. "Is your opinion of me that I would approve of all of the DYAD’s principles or methods or their approach to scientific pursuits?" Delphine shook her head and spread her hands helplessly. "Even if that were the case, do you think that we are disciplined enough as a species to curb our curiosity? The Duncans and the DYAD embarked on human cloning out of of pure human curiosity. I am here because of curiosity. Scott came here because of curiosity. Someone, somewhere at some time was bound to pursue this line of experimentation the moment we thought we had the means to try it in a practical setting and not just in science fiction. Humans were eager to shoot men into space the moment we thought we could prevent vacuums from instantly killing them. Are we always responsible when we pursue progress? If we take the Duncans and the DYAD as examples, clearly not. Is it possible to do something like human cloning responsibly? I— I don't know." Delphine shoved her hair back. "But I'm not here to defend the DYAD. I'm here to try to help you with this disease. I don't know what more I can do. I don't know what you want from me. But if you don't believe what I say, there's— there's nothing more I can do."

Scott, sitting still, looked carefully from one to the other. Cosima sat, a storm of expressions swirling across her face, in the flex of her jaw, and the flatness of her gaze, but inscrutable.

Cosima's phone dinged.

Cosima broke eye contact to scoop up the device. Scanning the screen, she announced, "It's Sarah. She said there's a meetup tonight."

Delphine rubbed at her eyes. "We need to talk about Sarah."

Cosima lifted her gaze. "What do you mean?"

"I mean I think we need to examine Sarah's biology," Delphine said, forcing the words out.

Cosima smirked. "You mean like why she—" Cosima glanced at Scott, then continued. "You mean like why she's fertile and the rest of us aren't."

"I mean like why is she immune and you aren't," Delphine said. "If that's true, Sarah, as much as any other possibility we might explore, may be the key to a cure. We should run comparisons between
her DNA and yours to see if there are any deviations, screen her blood for possible antibodies that might be discouraging an overactive autoimmune response, possibly conduct a bone marrow transplant—"

"Which would put Sarah's health at risk," Cosima observed.

Delphine closed her eyes and tapped the armrests with the tips of her middle fingers. "We should not exclude any options at this moment." She opened her eyes. "But you will have to be the one to speak to Sarah. She has no reason to listen to me."

"But I have reason to listen to you?" Cosima said, deadpan.

"Yes," Delphine said. She was tired of running up against the walls that Cosima erected between them.

Cosima sighed, nodding, then covered a truncated cough. Clearing her throat, she said, "I'll talk to her."

Without another word, Cosima pushed herself to her feet and, hand fisted against her mouth, walked out of the lab.

*

From Delphine [4:40]: I don't think I will be able to see you tonight. I think I will be working late.
To Delphine [4:55]: That's ok. U must be busy.
From Delphine [4:56]: I was presenting that as a complaint. I would like to see you tonight but work is preventing me.
To Delphine [4:57]: Lol. Ur work is important so I understand.
From Delphine [4:58]: But my work doesn't understand me or that I want to see you.
To Delphine [4:59]: Omg.
To Delphine [4:50]: Thx for the laugh.
From Delphine [4:51]: Laugh? I am being serious. You're laughing at my plight?
To Delphine [4:52]: A little bit.
From Delphine [4:53]: You don't share my pain?
To Delphine [4:54]: Is this an elaborate ploy to get me to say I miss u?
From Delphine [4:55]: Do you miss me?
To Delphine [4:56]: Yes.
From Delphine [4:57]: I miss you, too.

*

Shay stared at the last message she had sent and Delphine's response tucked beneath it. Her words sat in the text box like an admission.

Shay didn't think about Delphine most times of the day. Rather, she tried not to think about Delphine when they weren't in communication, weren't scheduled to meet, weren't face-to-face.

But what she'd told Delphine hadn't been a lie. It was easier not to think about Delphine in order not to feel the lack of Delphine's presence.

It was easier to not think about missing Delphine. To package the sentiment into expressed words felt like a shovel striking dirt, the impact like a thud in Shay's chest, reverberating through her bones like the foundation shifting, carved out, from beneath Shay's feet. Each iteration was a motion in a burial, measured and steady, occurring whether Shay looked or not, and to shape the words forced Shay to
peer down and acknowledge the reality engulfing her whole.

Shay missed Delphine.

But Delphine missed her, too.

Delphine smiled at random intervals. Awareness of her muscles stretching taut lagged the reality of its occurrence, so that upon catching herself Delphine had no idea how long she’d been smiling. The sentiment of Shay's message raised memories of Shay's hand in hers, or the almost shy manner of Shay's recent glances or ducked gaze, or the way Shay's shoulder tucked into her thigh as Shay rested upon her. Shay's response felt like a tether to a future meeting. Delphine missed Shay, but she felt assured in the notion of a reunion—that she would make opportunity to see Shay soon even if not tonight. That, if Shay's reply was to believed, Shay wanted the same.

It felt a lot like winning. Not in the way Delphine knew Shay meant it when Shay teased her, as in a victory over Shay in a battle of wills, but winning as if life were handing Delphine a reward, a treat, an unexpected gift of delight.

Delphine grew the pearl of thought in her mind to carry with her.

As the sunlight faded in the late afternoon, Cosima's gaze snagged Delphine's attention. The jolt of meeting Cosima's eyes sparked the realization that she was smiling to herself. Twin shots of shock and perceived self-incrimination attempted to smooth Delphine's expression. Delphine squelched the reflex, reversed the course of signals, and yanked up one corner of her mouth into a smirk accompanied by a raised eyebrow.

The counter-surveillance mashed Cosima's mouth into a line and her eyes narrowing. Cosima had returned to the lab quiet and left the hanging thread of their earlier tension untouched. Licking her lips—dry, Delphine noted for the first time that day—Cosima said, "You ready to do this?"

"Can . . . can I come?" piped up Scott.

They turned to him, startled, and Delphine looked to Cosima, who was turning to look at Delphine, the same question in their gazes. Delphine spoke first. "It's your decision, Cosima."

Cosima paused. "Yeah? It is?"

Delphine offered the barest lift of a shoulder. "Leekie assigned me to be your . . . supervisor." Delphine shook her head. "But that doesn't—it doesn't apply to where we're going next. This is your decision."

Cosima nodded slowly. "You want to come, Scottie? I don't know what we're walking into."

Scott shrugged. "So? I'm going to walk into it, too, eventually."

"Alright," Cosima agreed, cheery. "Let's go." She hesitated. "Should we, like, take everything we might want to take right now? Just in case?"

Delphine and Scott exchanged glances. The startled uncertainty Delphine saw reflected back at her struck, for an astonishing moment, a chord of sympathy.
Cosima wanted to take the hard drives. Any other equipment could be replaced, presumably, but she wanted to rip the hard drives out. "They don't deserve whatever they don't already have."

"Okay, yes," Delphine agreed hastily, a hand pressed to her forehead, "they don't deserve it. But we can copy the files and wipe the drives. We don't need to take them. Especially not right now. We don't have the time. We can do it—tomorrow."

"How do you know?" quipped Cosima. "This might be the last time we stand in this lab."

"That's possible," Delphine conceded. "But we can choose to—" Delphine's mind attempted to drop maintenir les apparences onto her tongue before it churned out the English—"maintain appearances for another day, if that's what we need." She glanced about. "That will give you time to gather your personal belongings as well."

Cosima pulled a face of displeasure. "Fine. We'll do it your way."

Delphine's bilingual struggle sat in her mind as she ferried the three of them to Beth's former residence. Her word choice in particular niggled at her. The English prompted no reaction from the Americans, but Delphine felt the exposure of the strain fraying her patience and edge. The lies were acquiring layers, like bedrock, and lay on her shoulders with as much weight. She was lying for the DYAD, she was lying to the DYAD, she was lying to slip away from the DYAD, all the while measuring how much to tell Cosima. The lies—and calculated omissions—would require different considerations with Marion Bowles.

But Delphine didn't know if she could keep track of all the constellations she'd strewn.

Sarah was waiting for them. With Professor Duncan.

Cosima leapt to mediate introductions, urging Scott forward. Scott seemed unsure which figure demanded more wide-eyed staring, Sarah or Professor Duncan.

"Scott," Cosima said to break him out of his trance, "this is Sarah. One of my sisters."

"H-hi," Scott managed. Sarah stepped forward and gave his hand a strong, perfunctory pump.

"And this," Cosima said, gesturing to Professor Duncan, "is my maker, the original geneticist, Ethan Duncan. Professor Duncan, this is Scott."

As pleasantries, compliments, modesty, and inquiries were traded, Delphine made eye contact with Sarah hovering in the background. Sarah's gaze reflected Delphine's concern: Here was the next hurdle. Professor Duncan would meet Marion Bowles. It had to go well. Whether their plans advanced or not hinged on the cooperation of all gathered parties. Sarah's eyes took the measure of Delphine, as if gauging the sufficiency of Delphine's willingness and investment to grant her right of admission. Perhaps the act was meant to be intimidating. Perhaps it should have been intimidating. But Sarah occupied a position lower on the list of persons Delphine considered capable of inflicting terrible, far-reaching retribution.

They were waiting for the woman edging up to usurp the top position on that list.

A perfunctory knock announced Marion Bowles's arrival.

The room shuffled as if the occupants were actors taking places on a stage before the curtain was raised. When no one made a move to admit the final caller, Sarah opened the door. A suited man stepped in first, gaze sweeping about, checking around corners, and signalled an all clear. Delphine half-expected him to announce his employer.
But Marion Bowles did not need a crier. Her eyes immediately found Professor Duncan, yet her smile turned first upon the Leda pair. "Sarah, Cosima. Thank you for making the time on short notice."

The twitch of Sarah's clenched jaw dismissed the overture. "Marion, this is Ethan Duncan."

"Yes, of course," Marion said, stepping toward the spindly man and extending a hand. "Marion Bowles."

"Who are you?" Professor Duncan demanded, ignoring the hand.

Marion retracted her hand without a stumble or stutter. "I'm Marion Bowles. I'm working with Cosima to provide a laboratory outside of the DYAD in which you can conduct research unimpeded."

Professor Duncan's eyes narrowed on Marion. No wisp of fuzziness clouded his gaze. "What does that make you? A DYAD cog? A Neolutionist lackey?"

"Neither," Marion said. "I speak for the interests of an independent group. We're known as Topside. Our intervention ensured that your girls weren't abandoned when the DYAD teetered on financial insolvency. Recognizing the value of your labors, we dedicated the resources needed to tend the fruit you left behind. But, as you know, they've been blighted. Quite possibly from the seed."

"The ones I helped plant, perhaps," Professor Duncan sneered. "I'm sure that once you saw what the DYAD possessed, you left well enough alone and didn't attempt to germinate your own."

Marion didn't blink. "An achievement once tasted will always entice us to reach for it again. That's our nature. Tell me you wouldn't think less of us as scientists if we hadn't attempted to repeat your breakthrough." Marion performed a minute shake of her head. "Many attempts were made, but the laboratory fire eliminated too many essential factors."

"And my Susan," hissed Professor Duncan, a tremble creeping into his hands. "And ripped my daughter from me."

Marion's nod was measured. "Rachel. Yes."

"It was Aldous Leekie. He wanted us dead."

Marion nodded. "Yes."

"You know," intoned Professor Duncan, shoulders drooping.

"Aldous presented his actions as a preservation tactic. He said you planned to expose the project and effectively end it. Is that true?"

Professor Duncan stood silent beneath Marion's study. "You think our sin was the greater one? That murder to silence us was justified?"

"I didn't make Aldous's decision, but I understood his fear."

"Meaning you would have likely made a similar decision?" Professor Duncan pressed.

Marion's shoulders relaxed. "If history should repeat itself, I guess we'll find out."

Professor Duncan's expression stretched tight upon a contained affront. "I suppose you intend to use my knowledge to pick up where Susan and I left off."
"At this moment," Marion said, voice even, "my priorities align with Cosima's. The subjects are ill. We need to address that. Quickly."

"Why should that be such an immediate concern to you?" Professor Duncan demanded. "Are you worried that all the money you fed into DYAD will be laid to waste when you've spent all this time trying to salvage it?"

Marion didn't budge. "I will do everything in my power to prevent the possibility that my daughter succumbs to a disease with no recourse."

Professor Duncan's brow contracted. "Your daughter?"

"In the wake of losing you, the DYAD managed one success in their many subsequent trials," Marion said. "My daughter. Her name is Charlotte. She's eight years old. You might find her very familiar at this age."

The two studied one another.

"I want to see my daughter," Professor Duncan said.

"I understand," Marion said. "But she . . . hasn't yet been informed of your status."

"You mean she's still under the impression that I'm dead."

Marion nodded. "Such a revelation would engender a degree of upheaval for which I'm not at the moment prepared to mitigate or contain. This has to be handled delicately."

"I can think of a simple solution."

"Aldous will be addressed," Marion said, reading into Professor Duncan's thoughts, "when I have a suitable candidate to replace him." Marion assessed Professor Duncan's unwavering gaze. "In your absence, Aldous has been guardian to Rachel."

"Does she know what he did?"

"No," Marion answered, blunt but almost gentle. "We deemed it better that she be spared that."

"Why did you give her to that monster?" Professor Duncan said, a hint of despair in his tone.

"We at Topside did nothing of the sort," berated Marion. "When we stepped into the picture, that arrangement was already in place. There was no reason to disrupt the familiarity and acceptance already established between both sides." Marion took a sharp breath. "We recognize that Aldous has been far from an ideal parental figure, but what was done was done. And now Rachel is an adult. She occupies her own position within the DYAD. One she's worked hard to attain. If you think it will simply be a matter of stepping back into her life and sweeping her away from DYAD's sphere, I think you'll find the situation more complicated than that. She's not a little girl anymore and, while I'm sorry for your lost time, no one can give that little girl back to you."

Professor Duncan deflated on an exhalation long and slow. His person reverted to the impression of weary and frail that Delphine had formed upon their first encounter. "It wasn't supposed to be like this. We loved her. Susan and I loved Rachel."

"I understand. I love Charlotte. And if this disease comes for her, I want a weapon to beat it back. I'm not here to stand in your way. I'm here to pave it to make the journey as smooth as possible."
Professor Duncan glanced off at Sarah, then to Cosima. Cosima nodded, sympathetic but resigned. "Charlotte's real. And definitely one of us. We've met."

Professor Duncan hung his head. Straightening back up, neck straining as if under the weight of a yoke, he said, "You're not a Neolutionist."

Marion shook her head. "No."

"Then what are the stakes for . . . Topside?" Professor Duncan asked.

"Profit," chimed in Sarah.

Marion nodded. "And control."

Professor Duncan's eyes narrowed. "You seek a monopoly on knowledge?"

"Sometimes a steady hand is needed on the handle of the tap," Marion said.

"So you'll acquire the cure first and then the keys to the kingdom," Professor Duncan said. "You get your daughter safe and sound and possibly all the daughters you might ever want, but I still won't have my Rachel."

"The same will hold true if Rachel falls victim to the disease like the others," pointed out Marion.

"I have yet to see how corroborating with you puts me in a better position than dealing with DYAD," countered Professor Duncan.

"To deal with DYAD is to strike a partnership with Aldous Leekie," Marion said. Professor Duncan's eyes peered at her with laser intensity. Marion pressed her hands together. "Dr. Duncan, my aim is to put you at ease so that we might all move forward. I understand that returning from the dead puts you at risk. I have spoken to Sarah and Cosima, but your consent is required as well." Marion paused. "I admit that if it were not for Charlotte, I doubt I would have taken this tack. My motives are selfish and self-serving. As yours have a right to be." Marion steadied herself with a breath. "I need time to find a smart approach to Rachel. This will upend her world, you understand."

"Her world has been a lie," Professor Duncan said.

"Whose world isn't a lie?" Marion quipped. "We are cocooned in lies and narratives that we believe for lack of alternatives or, in fact, choose to believe. She thought you were dead and she had to believe that was the case because, by dint of your absence and silence, you effectively were."

The color retreated from Professor Duncan's face. Delphine edged a few steps closer to him in fear that he might falter on his feet.

"We've all had a hand in this lie," Marion said, her words forbearing. "The truth is that I don't know how Rachel will react."

Professor Duncan blinked rapidly. "I want to meet with my daughter. That's my condition."

Marion's lips thinned into a line. Easing up, she nodded. "Very well. But until it can be arranged, will you at least start on developing a cure?"

"I will," Professor Duncan said.

Relief expelled the breath and tension out of Delphine.
Marion didn't hesitate. "Then there are practical matters to discuss."

The furniture emerged from beneath their shrouds and everyone availed themselves of a seat. Sarah produced alcohol from cabinets not yet emptied and discovered glasses stowed in a box. Professor Duncan declined a glass, asked if the kettle could be put on—but the stripped kitchen offered up no kettle. Professor Duncan opted to go empty-handed. Delphine followed his lead, conscious of the need to track the impending conversation.

"I have prepared a laboratory in the city for your use," Marion announced.

"Where would that be?" Sarah asked.

"Somewhere at a bit of a remove. When all is ready, perhaps tomorrow or the day following, an escort will transport you to the location. There are some security protocols that require your presence to set up, but following that the lab will be at your disposal. You'll be free to come and go as you please." Marion turned to Professor Duncan. "Dr. Duncan, it's my understanding that the current circumstances have deprived you of a . . . permanent residence."

Professor Duncan canted in his head in a gesture both shrug and nod.

"I don't know what kind of arrangements you've made or plan to keep," Marion said, "but we can reduce your exposure. The laboratory even has space enough to house you, if that's what you wish. There will be round-the-clock security and it will save you the trouble of commuting."

Irritation contorted Sarah's features. "You takin' him prisoner?"

"I'm presenting options," Marion said, unperturbed. "Dr. Duncan would not be a prisoner. The offer is of housing, as it were."

Professor Duncan glanced at Sarah, hunched forward with elbows on knees. He turned back to Marion and met Marion's eyes squarely. "May I have a bit of time to consider?"

Surprise jerked Sarah's head in Professor Duncan's direction.

Marion nodded. "Let us know if you need our assistance. Cosima, we duplicated the equipment requests you made for your current lab, but if there's anything in addition that you require, let us know."

Cosima glanced uneasily at Delphine. "You have that information?"

Delphine shook her head minutely to indicate she'd had no hand in this development.

"You may not expect it," Marion said, "but the DYAD maintains immaculate expense records."

"Yeah?" Cosima asked. "So you got the tea I like?"

Marion cocked an eyebrow. "I myself believe that the Republic of Tea deserves more commendation for their marketing rather than their quality—but you'll find some provided for your use."

Cosima sat back into the cushions, eyebrows rising and falling. "To each her own."

"I require some equipment," Professor Duncan announced. He withdrew a small notebook from the front pocket of his jacket and ripped out a page. One of the suited men fetched it and handed it to Marion.
A quick review made her look up, mildly bewildered. "Computer parts? These are . . . antiques."

"I'm a bit of relic myself, I dare say," Professor Duncan said.

Marion's lips twitched. "It may take a few days to assemble all these components."

"In which case your resources are to be commended," Professor Duncan said.

Marion folded the paper and slipped it into the pocket of her coat. "I find that even hidden doors might open given the right price."

"I'd not concern yourself so much with the hidden doors," Professor Duncan intoned, slipping the notebook back into his front pocket, "but rather the hidden costs. Those debts accrue interest."

"Let's hope to pay them off," Marion remarked blithely.

Glances were exchanged around the room. The frown never left Sarah's lips. Grim determination shelved Cosima's brow. Marion and Professor Duncan coolly regarded one another.

Delphine met Scott's eyes. He wore the expression of an animal caught in a floodlight.

Delphine suspected her gaze might have conveyed the same.

At the door, with the whole room on their feet to see her off, Marion met Delphine's eyes. "I'll be in touch."

"Why are you speaking to Delphine?" Sarah interjected. "Is she your inside man? Switched teams to play monitor for you instead of Leekie?"

Surprise flooded Marion's features. Then she smiled. "No. She isn't. It was a reflex. Among all of you, Dr. Cormier is the most familiar with DYAD operations."

Sarah scoffed. "You mean all the backdoor dealing and under-the-radar cloak-and-dagger schemes?"

Marion's smile tightened. She turned to Cosima. "I'll be in touch."

"Yeah," Cosima said, biting back a smile. "We'll be ready."

Marion's gaze passed over all of them before she stepped out. Sarah moved to the window and tracked Marion's departure. When the street lay dark again, Sarah turned to Cosima and asked, "Do we trust her?"

Cosima raised an eyebrow that captured the surprise Delphine felt. "We're doing this, right? That's why we came here and discussed all the bases—because we're doing this."

"All that stuff she was saying about Charlotte—you believe it?" Sarah pressed.

Cosima was slow to respond. "You mean about loving Charlotte? Or do you mean, like, that you don't think that the reason—the primary reason—that Marion wants to work with us is for Charlotte's sake?"

Sarah crossed her arms. "I've seen a lot of cons."

Cosima's eyebrows shot up, hands at her sides turning palms out. "You think this is a con?"
Sarah glanced toward the window. "She ambushed us with that dinner, set it up so that we'd sit down with her kid." Sarah spared a glance at Professor Duncan through her lashes. "And she knew what would be most important to Duncan."

"You didn't answer my question," said Cosima.

"You didn't answer mine," Sarah quipped.

Cosima shook her head. "You're the expert."

"I can't tell," huffed Sarah.

Cosima threw up her hands. "Well, the possibility hadn't occurred to me until you brought it up!"

"Don't trust 'em so easily, Cos. I know you need 'em or what they can give you, but—" Sarah breathed out hard through her nose. "Be careful. We're still the lab rats in their precious project."

Cosima nodded, expression closing, somewhat chastened.

Sarah slipped her hands into the back pockets of her jeans. "Alright, then, I guess everyone knows the plan."

"Yeah, I'll keep you updated," Cosima said with an aimless wave of her hand.

"Cosima," prompted Delphine in a low voice.

Cosima turned to Delphine with confusion. Delphine indicated Sarah with her chin. Cosima's eyebrows huddled.

"What?" asked Cosima.

"You should ask her," urged Delphine. "About what we discussed earlier."

"What did we—oh. That? Here? Now?"

Delphine spread her hands as if to say, *If not now, when?*

"What?" Sarah demanded, looking between the two of them.

Cosima bit her lower lip, settled her hands on her hips, fanned her elbows out, and bowed her head. Lifting her head, uncertainty crinkling her features, Cosima said, "Well, Sarah, you know that with Professor Duncan's help we can—hopefully—devise a gene therapy. Like, that's the goal. But there's also . . . another possible path we could pursue."

"Kira?" Sarah supplied, sharp and hostile.

"No. You. Because you seem to have immunity."

Sarah folded her arms and shifted her weight. "What are you talking about? Is this the bone marrow transplant the doc mentioned?"

Professor Duncan examined Sarah with renewed interest. "Are you certain she's immune?"

"No," Cosima said, "and that's what I'm trying to get at. We want to confirm if you're immune—and see if we can pinpoint how you're immune. If this disease isn't simply genetic or if your defense is in some unique expression of your genes, like if your body is producing whatever causes this reaction
in the rest of us but found a way to fight that, then . . . you could be the source of a cure, Sarah. But we'd need blood samples and—and your permission to study you."

"You want to study me in this new secret lab?" Sarah said.

"You wouldn't have to go to the lab," Cosima said. "We just need to collect samples from you. I'm not suggesting anything invasive." Delphine bit back a sigh. Cosima, glancing over, caught her expression and added, "For now. But Delphine was saying—" Sarah glanced at Delphine. "—that your immune system might contain antibodies that could be fighting this disease."

"Is that a thing?" Sarah asked, skeptical.

"It could be," Cosima agreed.

"But studying you and isolating any possible cure from what we might find would take time," Delphine said. "We can work on a gene therapy and study your biology simultaneously. That way we maximize our time and minimize any time we might lose if one or the other does not pan out."

Unreadable thoughts rendered Sarah quiet. Her eyes settled trouble on Cosima. "We could have been doing this sooner, Cos."

"It . . . didn't occur to me that we should have been," Cosima breathed. "I'm not the one with the doctorate in immunology."

Sarah's eyes flickered to Delphine.

Delphine sucked at her lips. "I did not know sooner."

Sarah's eyebrows furrowed. "The having a kid thing didn't tip you off that my biology might be different?"

"That means you are fertile when you shouldn't have been," Delphine said softly, "but does not necessarily indicate that you have immunity from this separate issue. We'll have a better answer once we determine the agent." She looked to Professor Duncan. "And our chances of doing so are now much improved."

Professor Duncan covered his mouth, eyes assessing Sarah. "I think you might be onto something."

"Don't look at me like that," Sarah snapped.

Professor Duncan blinked, owlish, fingers slipping off his chin. He eased into a sheepish smile. "My apologies."

Sarah exhaled in a gust and raised her hands in what was more or less surrender. "Alright, since everyone seems to be on the same page, let me know what you need from me." She raked her gaze across them. "Anything else?"

Scott raised his hand tentatively.

Sarah jerked her chin at him. "Yeah?"

"This might not be important," Scott said, "but, um, should we put everything back the way we found it?"
"Can we get food?" Cosima asked from the passenger seat on the drive back to the DYAD Institute, where Scott's car remained in the parking lot. (That Scott had a vehicle while Cosima did not was a point of fact on which Delphine chose not to dwell.) They stopped at a late-night diner that none of them recognized, the three of them shuffling inside as if seeking refuge. Cosima had a bowl of soup and a salad and, to Delphine's silent approval, left behind only some leaves and a few spoonfuls of soup. Delphine found her own salad a lackluster meal, but Scott seemed happy with his hamburger.

Cosima and Scott conducted conversation Delphine didn't understand, something about a group for gaming and what might have been an actual game, while Cosima sent occasional looks in Delphine's direction, as if to confirm Delphine was still present at the table. Cosima and Scott laugheded and wheedled each other as if they had not, less than an hour earlier, been conspiring to undercut the company that ostensibly held them in employment.

It wasn't until she was alone in the DYAD Institute parking lot, Scott having volunteered to drive Cosima home, that Delphine checked her phone.

She'd missed a message.

From Shay [22:27]: Heading to bed early. Good night. :)

Delphine contemplated her phone. She rubbed at her eyes, the day's length crashing into her all at once with heart-sinking immediacy.

To Shay [23:33]: I'm sorry I missed your message. Sleep well.

Delphine leaned back in the driver seat and stared up at the sky through the windshield. The lights in the parking lot and from the collective city lent a filter of haziness that obscured the radiance of the far-flung stars. Delphine remembered the planetarium, gazing up at the screen, the hush of the room, eyes straining to see the projections. Delphine wanted to be there again, if being there meant Shay would be seated beside her.

Shay had said she wanted to return.

But, like the stars difficult to discern, Delphine struggled to see into the next day, much less past it. Which didn't mean that Delphine couldn't plan for a repeat of the planetarium—and for Shay.

Delphine smiled around a puff of laughter.

As if she'd planned for Shay.

But she could.

Delphine would.
To Delphine [6:45]: I did sleep well, thanks. Did u?
From Delphine [7:30]: Not as well as I slept at your place on Tuesday night.
To Delphine [7:32]: R u being smooth?
From Delphine [7:33]: I don't know what you mean?
To Delphine [7:33]: Ok
From Delphine [7:34]: What did you mean?
To Delphine [7:34]: Nothing
From Delphine [8:52]: This does not seem like nothing.
To Delphine [8:59]: I thought we were done with this conversation. ;D
From Delphine [9:00]: I had to step away to dress and drive. What did you mean?
To Delphine [10:10]: Sorry, early appointment. I didn't mean anything. I was being silly.
From Delphine [10:12]: How were you being silly?
To Delphine [10:13]: If only u could see how I rolled my eyes.
From Delphine [10:14]: Yes? I am sitting on the edge of my seat in anticipation of your answer.
To Delphine [10:15]: Ok.
To Delphine [10:16]: Well. I thought that u mentioned Tuesday night as a way to tell me that u want to stay over again.
From Delphine [10:17]: Yes, I want that.
From Delphine [10:18]: But I did mean that I slept very well on Tuesday and haven't slept as well since.
To Delphine [10:20]: R u just teasing me now?
To Delphine [10:22]: Omg
To Delphine [10:22]: my next appt's here. Talk to u later!

* 

Glee.

That was the sentiment in the curl of Cosima's mouth as an external hard drive leached away reams of DYAD's proprietary intellectual property. It was, perhaps, the happiest Delphine had yet witnessed Cosima. The joyful mischief raised a conflict of emotions in Delphine as she watched Cosima—empathy with the triumph of a spiteful victory, sympathy for the depths of bitterness burrowed into Cosima's psyche, sadness that these were the circumstances from which Cosima derived unbridled satisfaction.

Cosima glanced at Delphine and demanded, "What?"

Delphine composed her expression—whatever it might have been broadcasting—and tilted her head with a slight shrug. "I guess I did not picture my career coming to this point."

"What point?"

"Theft," Delphine said.

A bark of laughter exploded out of Cosima. A cough ambushed the mirth, but did little to deter the brightness in Cosima's eyes paired to the incredulous smile clinging to her lips from behind her hand. Delphine filled a mug with water, placed it within Cosima's reach, and peeled away to retrieve the box of tissues. Delphine held out the box to Cosima, who yanked out two sheets and mashed them against her mouth. Heaves abating, Cosima gulped in a lungful of air, exhaled, and sipped at the
"Thanks," Cosima rasped.

"Was what I said that funny?" Delphine asked, setting down the box of tissues.

Cosima dabbed conscientiously at her mouth and smirked. "Yes. Deception is okay, breaking ethical laws is okay, even outright illegal human experimentation is okay, but you draw the line at theft?"

Delphine smiled, but it strained in a tired effort. "You have to admit that this isn't like stealing a monitor or an incubator."

"If you put it like that," Cosima said mildly, "you might as well slap a label on me that declares me DYAD property and add stealing me off the premises to the list of crimes."

Delphine leaned against the edge of the desk. "Is it a list?"

Cosima raised an eyebrow. "Isn't it?"

Delphine frowned.

Cosima rocked in her chair. "You could write it all out, if you're unsure. Keep it on your phone. You're on it enough."

Delphine met Cosima's gaze.

Cosima balled up the tissue in one hand and covered it with her free hand. "Though I guess keeping a list of accruing crimes wouldn't give you much reason to smile. Not like whatever grabs your attention every time you look at your phone these days."

"Cat videos," Delphine said.

Cosima's eyebrows shot up. "And you didn't think to share them?"

Delphine smiled. "I didn't want to give you the impression that I'm a slacker."

Cosima tipped her chair all the way back, tapping her hand atop her fist. "You're still a bad liar."

Delphine's smile widened. "I thought I had done well."

"Yeah, well, you suck at lying," Cosima declared.

"What gives me away?" Delphine wondered.

"In this case?" Cosima asked. "The outrageousness of the lie. Do you even like cats?"

"I enjoy cats," Delphine said, somewhat defensively.

"Enough to watch cat videos on the Internet?" Cosima pressed.

"I have watched them."

"Okay, let me amend that," Cosima said. "Enough to look for cat videos and watch them here?"

Delphine spread her hands. "When there's nothing else to do . . . "

"And watch them in portrait and not in landscape?" Cosima continued.
Confusion struck Delphine. Cosima picked up her own phone and demonstrated, holding the phone upright and then turning it on its side.

Delphine chuckled. "What are you, a detective?"

"One of my sisters was, so—nothing says I don't possess the same skills," Cosima said.

Delphine tilted her head. "True."

Cosima swiveled in her chair. "So what's up with the extensive phone usage?"

Delphine shook her head. "It's personal."

"You're not sending love letters to Marion Bowles?"

Delphine guffawed. "No."

Cosima stared hard at her.

"I'm not going to show you my phone to prove it to you," Delphine said. "I would not ask to see the messages you receive from your family."

"It's family business?"

"It's personal," reiterated Delphine.

Cosima nodded with a softened consideration. "You know, a real monitor probably would want to see all the messages I receive, regardless of sender."

"Did your . . ." Delphine considered the appropriate designation. " . . . previous monitor ask to see your texts?"

Cosima grinned. "She never asked to see anything. I don't think monitors are told to ask."

"Do you think she tried to look?" Delphine wondered.

Cosima shook her head. "I don't know, dude." Gaze unfocused, Cosima's line of sight wandered off adrift. "That's the weird thing. Looking back, you start to wonder what stuff they got into and what they didn't. It could have been everything. It could have been nothing. Knowing they were there to spy on you . . . it rewrites everything you thought you knew." Cosima sat quiet. "Sometimes I'm like . . . I don't care. I never felt like I had to hide who I am. But sometimes . . ."

Delphine waited.

Cosima exhaled. "Sometimes it makes me angry."

Delphine crossed her arms and bowed her head.

"But," continued Cosima, "like, I've been with girls who kept diaries and I knew—like, intellectually—that they must have been writing about me. Or girls who posted pics of me and us all over social media. But, like . . . I knew. I might not have known of every instance, but I knew they were doing it and I never told them no. So I consented. Explicitly or implicitly. But the DYAD . . . they stole my whole life. And I had no idea it was happening. It's like I'm the star of my own Truman Show and I'm being exploited down to my very cells. They made the whole world a cage. And now I'm supposed to trust the people I know were assigned to mind me and my sisters."
"You have Scott," pointed out Delphine.

"Thanks for the reassurance on your part in this," Cosima said, droll.

"I don't need you to trust me to help cure you," Delphine said.

"It would be nice, though," Cosima sighed.

"I'm not stopping you," Delphine said.

"No?" Cosima asked airly, throwing her weight forward and planting her heels on the ground. "Then you might want to get better at lying. Or, y'know, just stop lying."

"What you're asking about has nothing to do with you or . . ." Delphine swept her arm through the air, "any of this."

"Yeah?" Cosima said. "It's affecting your focus and performance here."

Delphine's jaw stiffened, but she managed to say with a degree of evenness, "At the moment, there's not much to focus on or a level of performance to maintain."

"Well, that's going to change soon," Cosima said.

"I'm ready," Delphine said. "I'm going with you, aren't I?"

"Yeah," Cosima breathed out softly. "Yeah."

Cosima didn't sound excited or relieved. If anything, the odd note Delphine detected in Cosima's voice skewed closest to confusion.

*#

"Should we wipe the drives?" Cosima wondered. "Maybe infect their systems with a farewell virus? That'd be poetic."

Delphine put on an air of bafflement.

"Where'd I lose you?" Cosima asked.

"The poetry."

"Y'know, like, diseased experiment puts a disease in their computers?" Cosima posed.

Delphine smiled. Faltered and released a soft huff of amusement. Shook her head.

"Poetic justice, right?" Cosima asked again.

"I don't know if you should give them more reason to come after you," said Delphine.

"Us," Cosima said.

"Us," confirmed Delphine.

"That doesn't really make me feel like I shouldn't do it," Cosima said, returning to the topic.

"I can't help you if that's the path you want to pursue," Delphine said. "The only hardware I understand is the human body."
"Maybe I'll consult Scott," Cosima said. Scott had skipped off earlier, mentioning that there was a meeting he wanted to attend, muttering something that sounded like "for the last time." That neither Delphine nor Cosima had considered it possible that Scott might be running off to Leekie or some other Neolution contact struck Delphine in the moment as indicative of how effective a spy Scott could have been.

That Scott's qualification to be a spy was a matter of thought to her at all propelled Delphine to put the subject out of her mind as thoroughly as possible.

Cosima disconnected and gathered wires. "You want to get dinner?"

Delphine hesitated but said, "Sure."

"Did you have plans?"

Delphine attended to packing up her laptop. "No."

Which was true. Delphine had taken no steps to secure plans for the evening. She had merely hoped and intended to survey Shay's availability. And to seize any opening.

"Cool," Cosima said, "because I was thinking about having a home-cooked meal."

Delphine looked up more sharply than she intended. "Are you cooking?"

Cosima smirked. "Does that put fear in your heart?"

"No," Delphine said, wondering if it would be wise to suggest inviting Shay. "Curiosity."

"Sorry to disappoint," Cosima said and continued, without any elaboration on the first point, "but I am hoping to go into a food coma, so you might want to prepare for that. You know, maybe bring a med bag, all that good stuff."

Delphine stared at Cosima, uncomprehending.

Cosima appraised Delphine's perplexity and said, "I'll bring it."

To Siobhan Sadler's home.

Delphine parked the car and gazed toward the house. "Do they know I'm coming with you?"

"They know," Cosima said.

"Should we have brought something?" Delphine asked.

"We brought this," Cosima said, holding up the bag of medical equipment.

Which, to Delphine, didn't seem to be something a host would want a guest to bring to dinner.

Sarah admitted them at the door. As Delphine and Cosima shuffled into the foyer, Sarah eyed Delphine and gave her a resigned nod. "Alright, doc. Let's get this over with, yeah?"

Delphine, not knowing what they were doing that they should get it over, looked to Cosima with alarm. Cosima jiggled the medical bag. "She means collecting samples."

Delphine's lips parted silently with amazement.
Sarah, clearly apprised of the purpose of her and Cosima's visit where Delphine had been left in the dark, said, "Let's do this now, before dinner. It won't take long, yeah? 'Cause if it is, I'll tell everyone not to wait."

"How are you with needles?" Cosima asked.

"The less I think about 'em, the better," Sarah said, crustily, and led them upstairs.

Washing her hands in the full bathroom, idly noting the toothbrushes in a holder, the half-squeezed tubes of toothpastes—one formulated (or marketed) for children—beside the sink basin, and the number of towels adorning hooks and bars, Delphine processed the quiet, building sensation shortening her breaths.

Cosima had played her. Or at least had left Delphine to flounder and scramble to catch up. It was difficult not to feel duped. But Delphine knew that she couldn't let it overwhelm her, that it was likely that exact feeling that Cosima had wanted to induce in an effort to repay what Cosima likely felt Delphine—and the DYAD and all the monitors—had done to the subjects. Or perhaps this was Cosima's idea of a lighthearted prank.

And perhaps Cosima didn't want Delphine to understand.

Delphine let the water run warm over her hands and took long, steadying breaths.

What required focus now was the task at hand.

Sarah was offering her biology.

It did not take long. Delphine swabbed the inside of Sarah's cheek and drew several vials of blood. Sarah watched her with wariness and without flinching. Cosima provided a set of assisting hands and labeled contents in overall silence.

"That thing you mentioned before," Sarah said as Delphine handed off the second vial to Cosima.

Delphine lifted her eyes. "I'm not sure what you're referring to."

"That, um, test or whatever to see if me and Cos are compatible."

"HLA testing?" Delphine offered.

Sarah shrugged. "I guess? What do you use to test for that?"

"Your blood," Delphine said.

"So you can check for that?"

"I can check," confirmed Delphine.

"Alright," Sarah said, subdued, and said no more.

When Delphine placed a band aid over the puncture site, Cosima smiled at Sarah. "If it wouldn't ruin your appetite for dinner, I'd say you deserve an ice cream with how well you did."

"Shut up," Sarah growled, without sting.

They descended the stairs and triggered a summons to dinner. Mrs. S took a moment to give Cosima a one-armed embrace and Kira, bubbling with laughter, hopped over to seize Cosima's hands and
exchange giggling chatter. A din of overlapping voices ballooned as Sarah, Cosima, and Kira engaged in an escalating conversation of interjections and Mrs. S attempted to shoo everyone into chairs. But the dining table, meant to seat four, was too small to accommodate everyone. Professor Duncan insisted he was content to sit on the sofa, if Mrs. S trusted him not to stain the furniture. Mrs. S issued her blessing by producing a folding tray table from a closet. Sarah, combing her fingers through Kira's hair, waved Cosima and Delphine into chairs and directed Kira to take the place next to Cosima. Sarah helped Mrs. S serve everyone a plate of cabbage casserole and a bowl of stew, but ushered Mrs. S to take the final vacant chair. Mrs. S briefly grabbed Sarah's arm, as if to protest, but relinquished her hold without a word. That left Sarah to hover in the kitchen, watching all of them, using the counter as a table.

Around the table Kira and Cosima swapped glances and giggles like collaborators between bites, Mrs. S eyed Delphine, and Delphine attempted to not look out of place and concentrated on enjoying the hearty meal.

"So," Mrs. S said partway into dinner, "I understand all is ready?"

Cosima nodded, though Mrs. S's eyes remained on Delphine.

"It's a go," Cosima said.

"I'm not sure it's the plan I would have gone with," Mrs. S said softly, diverting her attention to Cosima.

"I'm not sure we had many choices," Cosima said. "I'm not ready to say at this point if Marion and Rachel are any different, but at least Marion hasn't taken active steps to inhibit research into a cure. As far as I know."

Delphine peeked in the direction of Professor Duncan at the mention of Rachel but he seemed wholly fixated on potatoes and cabbage.

"How are you feeling about it, chicken?" Mrs. S asked.

"Apprehensive," Cosima said. "Excited. I'm ready to work."

Mrs. S glanced over at Professor Duncan and nodded. "Well, should it not go as you planned, you know where your friends are."

Cosima smiled and swallowed her bite of stew. "This is really good, Mrs. S."

Delphine nodded in agreement. "Yes, it is. Thank you."

Mrs. S smiled, lips pressed tight. "I'm sorry I didn't have a good substitute to make the casserole vegetarian."

"Are you kidding?" Cosima waved her spoon over her large bowl of stew. "This is more than enough."

The motion drew Delphine's eye to the bowl, denoting the line that marked the extent to which the bowl had been filled, determining how much Cosima had eaten, making a mental note of what that signified about Cosima's appetite.

"You eat as much as you want," urged Mrs. S. "There's plenty left."

"Well," Cosima said slowly, sneaking a sly glance at Kira, "is there dessert?"
Mrs. S's eyebrows lifted. "Only for those who finish their dinner."

Kira cheered, a string of cabbage unfurling from her raised fork to descend with a plop onto her plate. Smiles and laughter broke out. With the room's eyes on Kira, Cosima conducted a discreet check of her phone. As her eyes assessed the display, a subtle alteration softened Cosima's smile. Cosima tapped at the screen, composing a text message as far as Delphine could guess, and tucked her phone away again.

Ice cream was offered to anyone who cleared their dishes but not their appetite. Cosima laughed and asked for a scoop. Kira volunteered to pour sprinkles on top and effectively buried the dairy treat beneath a layer of cheery rainbow sugar.

"Oh boy, it looks good," enthused Cosima, smiling at Kira. Her niece, Delphine reminded herself.

Delphine declined ice cream. And coffee. And tea. Mrs. S nodded in acknowledgement, not bitter or disappointed or vindicated, but as a hostess who had no more to put on the table.

After dinner Kira and Cosima migrated hand-in-hand to the living room area, where Kira pulled Cosima down to the rug to show off books and toys and entice Cosima to help with homework. Delphine remained seated at the dining table. Mrs. S bustled over to clear plates and bowls.

"Do you need help?" Delphine asked.

Mrs. S took a second to consider. "How are you at drying dishes?"

"We can find out," Delphine offered.

Mrs. S lifted an eyebrow. "Come along, then."

Mrs. S armed Delphine with a towel. Giggles emitted from behind them as Delphine and Mrs. S toiled side by side at the sink, Mrs. S washing and rinsing, Delphine drying and stacking each item handed to her.

"Cosima looks better than I expected her to," Mrs. S said as a dish frothed with proliferating soap suds with every pass of the sponge.

Delphine nodded. "She responded well to a treatment we tried. But the treatment is both limited and only a temporary measure."

"Derived from Kira," Mrs. S said.

Delphine looked over sharply.

Unfazed, Mrs. S said, "Sarah told me."

"We are not—we are not pursuing it." Delphine said. After a pause of thought, she added, "At the moment."

"So you might, down the line," Mrs. S concluded.

"Only if Cosima wishes it and all parties are agreed," Delphine replied, with more steel than perhaps was wise. "There are . . . other paths we can explore first."

Mrs. S nodded. "You'll for damn sure ask for her permission next time. That child does not deserve to be dragged any further into this."
Delphine stared down at the plate in her hands. She opened her mouth, drew breath—and hesitated. Swallowing to wet her throat, she said, "Why don't you run? Why don't you take Sarah and Kira and run?"

Mrs. S shook her head, eyes directed on the dwindling number of dirty dishes. "That kind of gambit takes everyone's commitment. You're either all in and all together or you all wind up nowhere, fast."

Delphine tried to read between Mrs. S's words. "You tried?"

Mrs. S exhaled heavily. "It's an easier time of it when you're shuttin' little ones who believe you have all the answers and you must know what's best because you say so. But they grow up and get ideas in their heads and you have to decide if you're gonna respect that they have notions or not. Then there's what it'll cost you if you do, what it'll cost you if you don't."

"Does that mean that you considered fleeing but decided not to go through with it?" Delphine hazarded.

Mrs. S shook her head to herself. But what she said was, "From what I understand of the situation, you aren't required to go with Cosima on this venture."

Delphine whisked the towel across the bottom of the plate. "Cosima asked me to join her. But I want to go with her."

Mrs. S lifted an eyebrow. "Why's that?"

"I would like to help her," Delphine said. "I have seen what this disease can do."

Mrs. S studied Delphine with a critical eye. "You work for them, for DYAD, yes?"

Delphine nodded.

"How long have you been with them?"

Delphine stood silent for a stunned second. "Over a year now?" The accumulation of the months felt much longer than that, but Delphine hadn't passed a lifetime since she'd plunged into Leda. "Closer to two years than one year."

"How long have you known about all this?"

"About half a year?" Delphine estimated on the fly. "Maybe a little longer than that?" Delphine risked a speculative look. "How long have you known?"

"Not so long as even that," scoffed Mrs. S. "And I had one of their girls under my roof."

Delphine nodded slowly. "Did finding out . . . did it change how you looked at Sarah?"

Mrs. S laughed, a tad darkly, surprising Delphine. "No. No, but . . . it might have done her good to find she had more family. More people to care about. More reason to stick around."

Mrs. S handed Delphine a tall glass and pivoted to face her. "They're my people now, too. And the fact that you have eaten at my table does not mean that I will hesitate to end you if you do anything to hurt them."

Mrs. S had neither raised her voice nor changed her tone. She'd delivered a fact. Delphine held Mrs. S's gaze. "I'm going to do my best."

Their gazes remained locked.
Mrs. S turned back to the dishes first. "Then I wish you the best of luck." Mrs. S held out another glass and shut off the faucet. "That's all of it." She smiled, close-lipped. "Thanks for the help.

Sarah appeared at Delphine's elbow to stow away the dry dishes. When all had disappeared into the cabinets, Sarah leaned in close to Delphine and said, "I have something for you. Wait here a second."

Sarah skipped out and returned carrying a medium-sized wooden box with an elegant ribbon bow on top. "Here."

Delphine accepted the box with reluctance and confusion. It had more heft than she'd expected. Delphine tilted it one way and another, contemplating the bow. She could not imagine Sarah either crafting a decorative bow that looked so extravagant or bothering to buy one. Words deserted Delphine. "Thank you?"

Sarah twitched her chin toward the box. "Go ahead. Check it out."

Delphine lifted the lid and then slammed it back down when her brain processed the sight of the contents. She looked up at Sarah, wide-eyed.

"There's no serial number. And it's, um, small, the smallest available, so it should be easy to conceal. That's what I was told, anyway. Extra ammo is packed underneath. Though why you'd need it . . ." Sarah shrugged. "Whatever. It's your business."

Delphine took a deep breath, letting her mind accept that she was holding a gun. A gun illegally acquired and illegally in her possession. A gun that now belonged to her.

Another item on the list of accruing crimes.

The thought prompted an hysterical twitch of Delphine's lips.

Sarah shoved her hands into her back pockets. "Look, I'm trusting you to use that to protect Cosima and not that you're gonna use it on her. Got it?"

Delphine nodded measuredly, wrangling calm over the spike of adrenaline. "Yes." She nodded again. "Yes, of course. Thank you."

Sarah studied her with wariness. "Do you know how to use it? I can't really help you if you don't." Sarah shrugged. "But there are places that can teach you."

Delphine licked her lips. "Is that how you learned?"

Sarah smirked. "No." Sarah shifted her weight. "Look, some basics, make sure the safety is on when you're not using it—it's a little switch on the side—and that it's off when you want to use it. Never point it at someone if you don't mean it. Never point it at yourself, either. You should probably try shooting it—or any gun—once before you ever . . . get into a real situation. I haven't tried one like that, but the trigger will probably be heavier than you expect."

"Can you—can you show me?" Delphine asked.

Sarah shook her head. "That's not part of this deal. Go to a shooting range. You can get lessons."

Delphine nodded in a daze.
"I'm grateful for what you're doing," Sarah said, in a low voice. "So long as I believe that you're helping Cos. Cos ain't gonna carry one of these herself, so there's no point giving her one. I'm trusting you to know better. Yeah?"

Sarah's gaze bore into Delphine. Delphine nodded.

"I think I can get you information on shootin' ranges," Sarah said. She huffed, one corner of her mouth curling up. "Maybe a discount, too."

Delphine failed to see how a discount could improve her situation, but the look in Sarah's eyes suggested that a discount couldn't hurt.

A discount wouldn't hurt, but now Delphine carried the chilling sense that she very well could.

* 

Delphine and Sarah rejoined the rest of the household in the middle of an explanation of the cone cells in the human eye without any hint of how Cosima had arrived at the topic.

"What is going on here?" Sarah asked, hands on hips, as she surveyed her daughter and her sister languishing on the rug.

Delphine claimed a seat among the various furniture in the living room and rested the box upon her lap. She clasped it between her hands as if it might attempt to leap out of her grip. Her eyes skimmed over Professor Duncan, who sat quiet and watchful of the aunt-niece pair.

Kira grinned up at Sarah. "Auntie Cosima is telling me how we see colors."

"Is she?" Sarah asked, turning a skeptical eye on Cosima.

Cosima grinned up at her sister. "We humans have three separate types of cells in our eyes that work together to allow us to see different wavelengths, but other animals may have more or less, which is why they see different shades in the world from the ones we do."

"Is that so?" Sarah said, sounding no less doubtful. "And why does that matter?"

"Because," Kira said, holding up a crayon drawing of a dog, "we were talking about dogs and how because I drew a red ball, the dog might have trouble finding it if you threw it in the grass."

"Right. Dogs don't see the world in black and white—or, really, shades of gray—but they do only have two types of cone cells that don't distinguish between red and green," Cosima explained. "So it would have been better if the ball was, say, yellow."

"I see," Sarah intoned, unimpressed and unenthralled.

Cosima lifted a shoulder in a shrug. "It's good knowledge to have if you ever get a dog."

"I can't have a dog," sighed Kira.

"They're a lot of responsibility, love," Mrs. S said.

"I know," moaned Kira, eyes downcast.

"And speaking of responsibilities," Mrs. S continued, "you've got school tomorrow and we should be letting Cosima and her friend go."
Kira reared up on her knees. "Can Auntie Cosima stay a little longer?"

"It is already way past your bedtime, chicken," Mrs. S said.

"Pleeeease," Kira said, making eyes at all the authority figures in the room.

Cosima looked around. "Why don't I help you get ready for bed and read you some bedtime stories?"

Kira looked to Mrs. S with excitement. Delphine made note of the fact that permission rested in Mrs. S and not Sarah. "Well, since Cosima offered, I don't see why not."

Kira cheered and Delphine was struck by a faint sense of deja vu, even as her mind compared Charlotte's more subdued—but no less pleased—reaction to Kira's.

"Mum, will you come, too?" Kira asked.

"Of course, monkey," Sarah said. "Let's show . . . your Auntie Cosima what your room looks like, yeah?"

The three shuffled out in an uproar that seeded doubts that Kira would be put to bed soon or quickly. With the thunder of their footsteps on the stairs, Delphine checked her phone for the time. It was later than she'd expected.

She'd also been less alert or more distracted than she'd thought.

From Shay [22:18]: Heading to bed. Good night. :)

Almost twenty minutes had passed since the message's stealth arrival. On an impulse, Delphine stabbed the call button, got up, and excused herself, tucking the box beneath her arm. A turn around the partition ensconced her in the foyer where Delphine squeezed herself into the corner adjacent to the front door, putting her back to the wall so that she faced the stairs. The line connected on the third ring.

"Hello?" Shay answered, sleep in the rasp of her voice.

"Did I wake you?" Delphine asked softly.

"Delphine?" Shay asked muzzily. Shay inhaled sharply. "Mm, just dozing off."

"Sorry," Delphine mumbled. "I was hoping you hadn't actually gone to bed yet. I wanted to say good night."

"Yeah?" Shay said, drowsiness lingering in her voice.

Speaking lower, Delphine said, "I wanted to hear your voice."

There was a pause. "Are you okay?" Alertness energized Shay's voice. "How was your day?"

Delphine juggled the box against her hip and adjusted her grip on it. It was cumbersome despite being neither unduly large nor overbearingly heavy. It simply didn't . . . fit against Delphine. Yet putting it down never occurred to her. "It was, um, it was okay. I got held back by work again. I was hoping I would get out early and be able to go see you or get you to come over—" Delphine shook her head. "But none of that happened, obviously."

"Yeah," Shay said, voice stronger, "I thought Cosima might have been home earlier. I asked her if
she had dinner plans, but she told me not to worry about her."

Delphine leaned back against the wall. "You did?"

"I was making ravioli and thought I could throw in a few more if she was hungry and hadn't eaten. Nothing special," Shay added, with a squeeze of laughter in her tone, "just frozen pre-made ravioli from a bag."

"You didn't want to ask me?" Delphine asked.

"I thought if Cosima was home, then you were probably home, too, and since I hadn't heard from you . . ." Shay trailed off and resumed, softer, "I didn't want to bother you."

Delphine closed her eyes and smiled incredulously to herself. "I am bothering you, now, by calling you as you were trying to sleep. Sending me a message would not have been a bother to me."

Shay grunted, a muffled effort accompanied by a shifting sound in Delphine's ear. Delphine inferred that Shay was changing position, perhaps rolling over. "I didn't want to assume."

"You assumed with Cosima," pointed out Delphine.

"Because we live in the same building," Shay said.

"Oh," breathed Delphine. "Yes."

Shay giggled on an exhalation, short and low.

"Maybe I should correct that," Delphine said.

"Correct what?"

Delphine smiled. "What was it that you said on Monday? That women move in together quickly?"

"Oh my God, U-hauling?" Shay said.

"Yes."

Hesitation fostered silence from Shay's end. "You're not serious."

Delphine tilted her head back to rest against the wall. "You sound like you don't want me to be."

Silence buffered Shay's response. "I guess I don't want you to be. If I'm honest. Not about that—not right now."

Delphine stared up at the dormant light fixture in the foyer. "Is it hard to imagine? You could reduce your rent expenses."

Shay sighed, a chuckle in the release. "That . . . might be debatable. Knowing my tastes and seeing yours. Like if you moved into my place, yeah. But if I moved into yours? I might wind up spending more." Delphine thought she heard a smile in Shay's voice. "But what happened to encouraging me not to think too far ahead?"

"I didn't like the conclusions you were reaching before." Delphine bowed her head. "This one has an outcome I like and want to encourage."

"Yeah?" Shay asked, amusement underlying her scepticism. "Is it easy for you to imagine?"
"Yes," asserted Delphine confidently. "There are not yet enough croissants or pains au chocolat in the scenario, but I can imagine. You would not sleep on any sofas or couches."

Shay loosed a sleepy giggle. "Your couch was pretty comfy."

"The couch or the human pillow?" Delphine asked.

"Both," Shay said. Delphine was certain she heard a smile. "But the couch might have been more comfortable. Just a little bit."

The note of teasing made Delphine shake her head. "The couch will give your back regrets."

Shay laughed. But her tone fell soft with hesitation when she asked, "Did you live with any of your exes?"

Delphine waited for the surprise to pass. Shay's question didn't summon memories of Delphine's own past, but conjured domestic scenes of Beth Childs and the faceless monitor with whom she'd fashioned a home and a life. A home in which Delphine had stood and sat as if it had been no more than a backdrop. Maybe it had been, one crafted by the DYAD.

Delphine closed her eyes. "No . . . not in a formal manner." Delphine passed her tongue between her lips. "Did you?"

"I wouldn't . . . have called any of those situations 'living together' in a traditional sense."

"Does my history count against me?" Delphine wondered.

Shay was quiet, then said, "It kinda . . . makes me feel better."

Delphine's eyebrows rose. "What do you mean?"

"I was thinking that if you were serious about U-hauling, I'd have to rethink a few things," Shay said, "beginning with how good a judge of character I am. But that you didn't live with any of your exes is . . . close to the impression I got."

"What was the impression?" Delphine queried.

Shay paused. "That you were way too busy studying or being a doctor and a scientist to take the time to move in with someone."

Delphine laughed, then mashed her mouth against her shoulder to smother the sound. When her giggles dissipated, she said, "I can see why you would think that."

"Yeah? Is it an accurate assessment?" Shay asked.

"Maybe," Delphine said, smiling.

"Well—" Shay yawned. "—sorry if it isn't true."

Delphine slumped into the corner, still smiling, but wistfully. "I miss you. I feel like I haven't seen you in two weeks, not just two days."

"The past few days seem like they've been really long and busy for you," Shay said. "That would mess with your perception of time."

Amusement widened Delphine's smile. "Being busy usually makes time feel like it is passing
quickly."

"So have the past few days been really long and tedious?" Shay reconsidered.

"The past two days have contained zero sightings of you," Delphine said.

Shay made a sound between a groan and a giggle.

Delphine listened, heart inflated by the sound, and stared hard at the wall. "I can't tell if I forgot that it felt like this or that I did not forget because I hadn't known it was like this."

Delphine's words ushered in a pounding silence that beat in Delphine's ears.

"Did I say too much?" wondered Delphine, pushing a note of teasing into her tone to override any flush of uneasiness.

Shay spoke faintly. "How can I live up to that?"

Delphine shook her head. "What do you mean? There's nothing to live up to. I feel this way because of who you are."

"What happens when you see all sides of me?" Shay countered.

"Are there many sides left to see?" Delphine inquired.

Shay managed a little laugh. "Probably."

"Then I look forward to it," Delphine said.

"Even if it takes off the shine?"

Delphine smiled. "It is not a matter of shine, but that I will have so much more to look at." Delphine fought off a frown. "I don't want to send you to sleep with worries or doubts. Believe me. Please."

Shay delayed a response. "I thought seeing was believing for scientists."

"It is," confirmed Delphine. "That's why I intend to provide proof for every point I've made. Like any good scientist."

"I feel like that could sound threatening," Shay said with ponderous consideration, "but since it's coming from you, it sounds closer to aspirational." Shay's tone carried a smile. "I know how you like to set the bar high for yourself."

"I'm good at goals, remember?"

"I remember," Shay said, with fondness. Warmth softened her next words. "I miss you, too."

Delphine closed her eyes, imagining the feel of Shay against her rather than the box, wishing that were the case. The question slipped out of her. "Why did you sleep on the couch?"

"It felt like the right decision, in the moment," Shay said.

Delphine nodded to herself. She understood that Shay would see it that way. "I wish I could be with you now. And that you would not sleep on the couch if I were."

"Next time I won't sleep on the couch," Shay said.
Delphine smiled. "Good. I'll let you get to sleep now."

"Okay. Good night, Delphine."

"Good night, Shay."

Delphine lingered on the line until the distinct click of disconnection. With a sigh she lowered the phone, slipped it into a pocket, and took up the box with both hands. It was hard not to wallow in the speculation that the evening could have turned out differently if she had told Cosima no. But it proved just as hard to imagine that she might have declined. Delphine frowned at the box.

The companion accompanying her to her apartment tonight would be a pistol.

It was not the sort of roommate Delphine ever expected to welcome into her home. Nor the one she wanted.

Because, to her amazement, Delphine thought that maybe—maybe—she might entertain the scenario of one particular candidate and somehow the exercise felt neither frivolous nor farfetched.
Delphine surfaced from the grasping, jumbled tendrils of dreams with an urgency to check and secure a loaded firearm on her person. Blinking, she held herself still and allowed the environment to filter in—the quiet of her bedroom, the press of the comforter atop her, the dim glow of feeble early daylight at the edges of the closed curtains, the slowing of her heart rate. Delphine breathed out steadily.

The box blocked Delphine's line of sight to the clock on the nightstand where Delphine had left the container the night before, unsure what to do with it or the contents arranged with care in precision-cut foam. She'd avoided potential questions from Cosima by slipping out and placing the box in the trunk of her car after her call to Shay, but conveying the box inside had left Delphine's skin prickling as she'd smiled tight-lipped in passing at the fifth floor tenant with whom she'd shared the elevator. Delphine sighed, rested her forearm over her eyes, and dozed until her alarm sounded, whereupon she snatched up her phone and contemplated the charged device.

To Shay [06:33]: Good morning. Did you have a jogging, yoga, or meditation?
From Shay [06:36]: Lol is this going to be a regular question?
To Shay [06:37]: If I were there, I wouldn't have to ask.
From Shay [06:38]: Yoga and meditation today. Up already? Out of bed? Do u need to be up?
To Shay [06:39]: Not yet. About to get up.
From Shay [06:40]: Up and at em, sleepy.
To Shay [06:40]: No.
From Shay [06:41]: Ok. 5 min
To Shay [06:41]: That was easy.

Delphine kept an expectant eye on the messenger. Shay sent no immediate reply, so Delphine switched to checking her email.

From Shay [06:45]: Time's up. Up and at em.
To Shay [06:46]: That was 4 minutes.
From Shay [06:47]: Its 5 now
To Shay [06:48]: Okay okay.

Delphine swung out of bed, a smile on her lips. It wavered, somewhat, at the sight of the box. Delphine set down her phone and turned away to go to the bathroom. When she emerged, toweling her hair, a message waited for her.

From Shay [07:00]: Have smthg for breakfast.
To Shay [07:53]: Would adding cream to my coffee count?

Delphine smiled. When her phone beeped back, she scooped it up.

From Cosima [08:07]: It's field trip day. Don't go to the lab. Meet up at my place.

Delphine stared at the words. With a sigh she draped her towel over her shoulder to free up both hands.

To Cosima [08:09]: I'll be over.

Delphine returned to the bathroom to dry her hair, bringing the phone with her. Another message introduced a brief interruption.
From Shay [08:15]: Milk in ur coffee is not a meal.

Delphine smiled but didn't have the heart to inform Shay that she was skipping the coffee altogether.

Delphine put her car in park and gripped the steering wheel. She stared out the windshield, then focused on her handbag riding as passenger. The bag looked as innocuous as it always did.

Delphine had shoved the gun inside it—and clutched the bag tight down the hall, on the elevator, and on the walk to her car.

Taking a deep breath, Delphine plunged her hand inside and extracted the pistol, double checking the safety, and placed it in the glove compartment. To put it out of sight. To keep it away from her. For now.

The latch caught with a click that eased Delphine's next breath.

Entering the apartment building, feeling looser, Delphine detoured to Shay's door. Knocked. Waited. Received no reply.

No surprise.

Logic asserted that Delphine would have been more concerned—and confused—if Shay had appeared, but Delphine's steps weren't as light or eager as she headed upstairs. Lost in idle daydreaming, Delphine jolted to attention when Cosima pulled back the door. Delphine stared, robbed of the automatic response to Cosima's greeting, and fixated on Cosima's mouth.

A white substance dusted Cosima's mouth and dotted the tip of her nose. Was Cosima's skin dry? Could it be—but nothing in Cosima's medical records indicated she'd experimented with anything harder than LSD, certainly not—

"You want one?" Cosima asked, eyes narrowed on Delphine's face, and held up an object pinched between her fingers. She turned to indicate the man sitting in a desk chair. "He brought some. And muffins."

Eric smiled and pointed to a pink box on the kitchen counter. "There are more powdered doughnuts, if that's what you like, Dr. Cormier."

Delphine focused on the item in Cosima's hand and discerned it was, in fact, a sugared comestible half-consumed.

"Come in. Scott and Professor Duncan aren't here yet," Cosima declared and soon Delphine was seated with a muffin and a cup of hot water muddying its way to tea.

"How is Professor Duncan getting here?" Delphine asked.

"Scott," Cosima said.

Delphine hesitated. "I would not have minded going to get him."

"Scott didn't either," Cosima said.

Delphine nodded. She pinched off a chunk of the muffin top and inspected the dots that were blueberries. "Thank you for the breakfast, Eric, but . . . what is happening? What will we be doing?"
"I'm your guide to the laboratory," Eric said.

"You will drive us there?" Delphine asked.

Eric shook his head. "You'll drive. I'll show you the way."

"He gets shotgun," muttered Cosima.

"Why not give us the address and save yourself trouble?" Delphine asked.

"That's what I asked," Cosima said.

"This is more fun," Eric said, punctuating his answer with a smile.

"And that's what he told me," Cosima said. She sipped gingerly at her own mug of tea. "I'm almost willing to let it slide, though, because he brought doughnuts." Eric's smile threatened to ascend into beaming. Cosima ran her tongue over her lips, clearing a path through the powder. "You never brought doughnuts."

"I didn't know you liked them," Delphine said in a mild tone.

"Who doesn't like doughnuts?" Cosima groused.

Delphine wondered where Shay's opinion on doughnuts stood and popped a morsel of muffin into her mouth with a shrug. Just another day in this week.

* *

Delphine and Scott each drove their respective car. Cosima announced she'd hitch a ride with Scott and Professor Duncan. Eric volunteered to keep Delphine company and suggested that they lead. The arrangement gave Cosima a moment of pause but she stuck with her decision.

There was a second, as Eric lowered his frame into the passenger seat, that a cold sweat swathed Delphine's skin as she envisioned Eric idly checking the glove compartment. To find the gun. That Delphine had almost forgotten existed until she imagined Eric discovering it. But Eric's curiosity stretched no further than a squint up at the sun visor and reaching for the seat belt.

The discomfort banded tight around Delphine's chest relented with a deep breath.

Delphine attended the climate controls for distraction. Raising the temperature, she eased into a smile. "We've traded positions."

Eric glanced into the side mirror. "It feels a little strange to be on this side, if I'm honest."

"You cannot be driving all the time," Delphine said.

"I don't," confirmed Eric, "but Dr. Bowles would never be behind the wheel."

Delphine smiled. "Yes. I see. But I don't see cause for comparison. I am not Dr. Bowles."

Eric nodded and indicated Delphine should take the next right. Delphine toggled the turn signal. Eric said, "I'm not sure anyone could be Dr. Bowles except Dr. Bowles."

"She is a singular woman," Delphine agreed. She checked the rearview mirror to verify Scott remained behind her. "I suppose now we are both in her employ. Though perhaps in a way I always have been."
Eric glanced over at her but said nothing.

Delphine licked her lips. "How did you come to work for Dr. Bowles?"

A faint smile touched Eric's lips. He checked the side mirror again. "Is that supposed to be like water cooler chat? Should I ask how you like DYAD, and how you started working there?"

Delphine risked several rapid peeks at Eric. "I'm not sure what you mean by water cooler chat, but—there's not much to share. I went from medical school to an internship at the DYAD and afterward was offered a permanent position. From there it's been one thing after another and now I'm here."

"That's a very neat summary," Eric said. "Mine is a razor straight line, too. From the military, to private security, then to personal security."

Delphine nodded, a chiding smile overtaking her lips in acknowledgement of Eric's point: insight lay in the details. "I see."

Unperturbed, Eric scanned the environment with hawkish manner, his gaze cutting frequently to the side mirror.

"Scott is still following us," Delphine assured him.

Eric nodded.

A block later, Delphine asked, "Are you looking for something else?"

"My job is to be aware of the surroundings at all times, Dr. Cormier."

"Including the possible presence of uninvited parties?" Delphine asked. Eric's face betrayed nothing. "Today you're with us to make sure that doesn't happen, but... what's to prevent someone following me, or Cosima, or Scott, or anyone else at some other time?"

"Nothing," Eric said. He turned to her. "But I'm looking for it and you'll be looking for it, so at least there's that."

As far as reassurances went, Delphine couldn't credit Eric's words for instilling a sense of safety. They did, however, lend a sheen of appeal to the gun in the glove compartment.

"What should I do if I think I'm being followed?" Delphine asked.

"Get a good look, if you can," Eric said. "A clear picture would be the most helpful, but if you can't take one, note traits that would provide a good description. Hair color and cut, height, build, that sort of thing. If it's a car, model, make, color, license plate number. If you're pretty certain you're being followed, avoid wherever you're going, go somewhere public and neutral, like a Tim Hortons, and give us a call."

"What number should I call?"

"I'll give you one."

"And then I should just wait for you to come to the rescue?" Delphine asked.

A smirk touched Eric's lips. "We'll play it by ear."

Delphine hesitated. "What should I do in a confrontation?"
Eric peered at her long and steadily. "Unless you know how to defend yourself, don't get into a confrontation."

"What if I don't have a choice?" Delphine asked, eyes on the road. She worried at her lips. "Could you open the glove compartment?"

Eric didn't comply on command. His gaze remained focused on Delphine until, with reluctance, he reached for the latch. Delphine glanced over as the gun emerged on open display. A second later the lid descended with care and deliberation.

"I don't know how to use it," Delphine said when Eric offered no commentary.

"The question you have to ask yourself first," Eric said, voice even, "is whether you have the conviction to use it at all."

"If no one comes after me, I'll have no occasion to use it," Delphine reasoned. "But if I'm not so lucky . . ."

Eric supplied no pithy words of wisdom.

"Could you show me how to use it?" Delphine asked.

Eric exhaled heavily and turned away, to scan the streets. At last, reorienting to face forward, he nodded. "Can you get away for some time on Tuesday? That's my next free day."

"I'll make time," Delphine promised.

"Then I'll make arrangements," Eric said.

"Thank you," Delphine said, hushed.

Eric nodded but he didn't respond and his expression assumed a stony cast for the remainder of the journey, as if the topic had never been raised and an offer of aid extended. But when Delphine turned off the ignition, Eric took out his phone and asked her to recite her phone number. Delphine's phone buzzed a moment later.

"That's my number. I'll be in touch," he said, tucking his phone away into the inside pocket of his jacket. "Monday night, or Tuesday."

"You might get a call from me sooner than that," Delphine said. Eric looked up sharply. "I might get lost when I try to come here by myself."

Eric relaxed into a smirk. "I'll simplify the directions for you. It's not that tricky."

Delphine dropped her gaze. "That's a problem, isn't it?"

"If someone wants us to make it a problem for them, we will," Eric said and exited the vehicle.

Delphine lingered in her seat, mitigating an unexpected smile. The declaration didn't diminish the unrelenting pressure of diffuse anxieties, but in the cavalier confidence Delphine glimpsed a ray of effort that made her think that perhaps the scales didn't have to be tipped so broadly against them.

"Oh, jeez," Cosima breathed, hand atop Scott's car as if for balance, gaze roaming across the exterior of the time-grimed warehouse. "You're sure this isn't another fixer-upper?"
Scott retrieved a duffel bag from the backseat and straightened up with a grim expression that echoed Cosima's lack of excitement. Delphine smiled.

Cosima's skepticism didn't abate once they stepped inside. An unfamiliar face stuffed in a stock suit greeted them and promptly launched into security protocol procedures. In short order their thumb prints were fed through hardware and access codes were determined.

"You know," Cosima said, thumb pressed to the scanner, "one of my sisters could come in here impersonating me."

Their assistant smiled. "Not if you don't give out your PIN." He turned the keypad to Cosima. "Any four numbers of your choosing, Ms. Niehaus."

"But not my birthday, right?" Cosima said, contemplating the pad.

"You can if you want, if that's the only sequence of numbers you can remember," the man said. "But I don't recommend it."

Cosima smirked and poked at the pad. "You know what's funny? Me and my sisters, we all have the same physical features, but we all look different because we wear different clothes and have different haircuts. But you guys, you're all different—different body types, different heights, different ethnicities—but you all start to look the same because you wear the same plain suits and probably go to the same barber." Cosima grinned, to signal she was joking. "But I like you." She extended a hand. "I'm Cosima. What's your name?"

"Manuel," the man said, interrupting an input to shake Cosima's hand. "Manny, if that's too much to remember."

Cosima grinned. "Nice to meet you, Manuel."

"Likewise, Ms. Niehaus," Manuel said, returning to the task.

"Cosima."

Manuel hesitated. "Cosima." He gestured to the security panel by the door. "Go ahead. Give it a try."

Cosima entered her PIN and pressed her thumb to the scanner. The door opened and everyone in the party but Delphine craned to peek into the portal.

"Now that looks like it might lead somewhere worth getting hyped about," Cosima muttered, squinting into the brightness.

Manuel smiled.

"Why don't you go first and take a look?" Delphine suggested. "We'll join you as we finish up."

Cosima glanced around. "Is that cool with everyone?"

Scott shrugged and Professor Duncan nodded benevolent acquiescence.

"Alright," said Cosima. "I'll scope out the digs and see you guys soon."

Delphine went last, after Professor Duncan, who puttered through the process with a faint air of distaste.

"For so many years," Professor Duncan muttered, "I was denied possession of my true identity. Now
here I am handing it away."

"This is just for security, sir," Manuel said.

"Assuming a false name is a measure undertaken solely for security," Professor Duncan intoned, speaking to himself. "You can set it aside like a worn shirt. Not this." He pressed his thumb to the pad.

Delphine hesitated only at the final step. She considered the keypad, dismissed reusing her bank PIN, and tapped in 1027. A sequence she could reconstruct if she forgot the number outright.

As they stepped into the hall, Professor Duncan offered Delphine his arm. Delphine gave a little start of surprise but slipped her hand through his. He patted her hand. "You know, it was my Susan who solved the spindle protein problem. I look at you and Cosima and am reminded so much of her fire and brilliance."

Delphine digested the comparison. "I hope we find the same brilliance in developing a cure."

Professor Duncan nodded, somewhat absently. "Yes, yes."

Delphine glanced into Professor Duncan's bowed face. "Did you have any idea this might happen to the subjects?"

"Viability was always a concern," Professor Duncan said. "The possibility that we would face complications in their physical development was always more likely than that we wouldn't. What Susan accomplished was . . . nothing short of genius."

A genius lost that perhaps had resulted in consequences like Charlotte's leg.

Delphine wet her lips. "They're sterile."

"By design," Professor Duncan said. "That was also a tricky bit of configuration."

Delphine stared ahead. Professor Duncan had replied frankly, presenting a matter of fact that numerous women, had the experiment hit the parameters of success, would one day confront their infertility. Whether or not any of them desired children. That those who did would be forced to accept that their children would bear no biological relation. That all, regardless, were destined to wrestle with a reality none of them would expect.

Delphine's thoughts might have lain on her face because Cosima's grin faltered at the sight of Delphine and Professor Duncan entering the refrigeration room. Delphine covered by sending Cosima a look of question.

"Lots of bells and whistles, far more than we had before," said Cosima, grin reenergized. "What are we going to do with all of them?"

"What we came here to do: work," Delphine said. She nodded at Scott. "Ready to run those samples?"

"Whoa, hey," Cosima said, raising a hand to ward off Delphine. "Let's take a thorough look around first—peek in all the drawers, poke in all the holes. I haven't checked these refrigerators yet to see if they forgot anything. And," Cosima craned her neck around, "there's gotta be a fire exit, right? There can't be just one door in and out. Unless these conglomerate conspiracy types are about breaking all laws just because they can. You think a building inspector ever took a walk through here?"
"Did you find the computer I asked for?" Professor Duncan wondered, as if Cosima hadn't wandered down tangents.

"We did," Scott said, "but we haven't taken a closer look at it yet."

Professor Duncan patted Delphine's hand. "Very well. Shall we take a turn?"

No fire exit revealed itself, to their growing confusion, but they did find the electric kettle in the breakroom. With Scott and Professor Duncan off to tango with outmoded technology, Delphine and Cosima prepared cups of tea.

"I have a concern," Delphine said as she pulled down mugs from a cabinet and Cosima scoured drawers for a measuring spoon.

"What's that?" Cosima asked, settling on a regular teaspoon.

"We're not equipped or staffed to handle a medical emergency here."

"Yeah," Cosima agreed with reluctance, picking at the tape securing the lid of the tea canister.

"We should plan for an emergency," Delphine said softly.

Cosima waved the canister lid through the air. "What are our options? It's go to a local hospital or the DYAD—and I'm not sure we'd get through the doors of the DYAD. Or back out of them. "Cosima shook her head. "I mean, what else? Unless Topside has a private clinic."

Delphine and Cosima locked gazes.

"There is a possibility—" Delphine began.

"Yeah, it hit me as I said it," ceded Cosima.

Delphine permitted herself a smile of amusement. "I'm not sure how we would submit an inquiry to Dr. Bowles."

Cosima made a show of glancing around. "Is there a comments and suggestions box somewhere?"

"Does the security staff count? I think that's their secondary duty, to act as messengers."

"I'll file it away as something to ask Manuel," cracked Cosima. "Though that reminds me—aren't we supposed to have a line of communication to her?"

"I really do think it's the security staff members." Delphine waved her hand about vaguely. "So what do you think about the laboratory?"

"You said full-fledged facility, but, dude, I was not expecting this. This is more in line with what a mad scientist's laboratory should look like. And there's no way they put this together overnight. Not for us, anyway—I never asked for a morgue. What do you think they originally used this place for? Why do they have it sitting around? Kinda makes your skin crawl." Cosima shook her head.

"Sometimes I wonder if I should have stayed in Minnesota. I'm not sure what coming here got me."

"A stem cell treatment," Delphine said quietly. "And Professor Duncan."

"Both of which might result in nothing in the long run."
The kettle clicked. Delphine, closer to the appliance, made no move to retrieve it. "I have another concern."

Cosima crossed her arms in expectation.

Delphine modulated her tone into a measured cadence. "Being cut off from the DYAD means we have only one test subject."

Cosima nodded. "Me."

"We can't test everything on you."

"You're assuming we're going to have a lot to test," Cosima said, wry, "when we may end up lucky to have anything to test."

Cosima nudged Delphine out of the way to pick up the kettle. Delphine studied her closely. Cosima ignored the scrutiny.

"Cosima," Delphine said. Cosima turned an ear toward her but attended to the tea. "You believe that we can do this, don't you? That we will find a cure?"

The kettle dipped, pouring fast in hiccups, then tilted back, the stream steadying. "Yeah. Yeah. Of course, we can do this. Otherwise we went through all this hassle and backdoor dealing for nothing."

Delphine had doubts. That they would be successful. That they would find a cure. No matter how much effort they expended or the determination they summoned. She found it difficult to believe that the same doubts didn't hound Cosima. She'd asked, selfishly, to gauge Cosima's spirits. Because Delphine knew the awful helplessness of watching the hope die in another woman's eyes, the slow, creeping conviction of encroaching death extinguishing all joy and dreaming, a deterioration marked by a light of reproach and resentment.

It was a selfish impulse to want to avoid a repeat of that experience.

It was a selfish motivation to want to spare Cosima in lieu of the person she'd left behind.

But Delphine grasped the inducement tight. As reminder. As goad.

Cosima sipped the tea and turned to Delphine with a smile. "I don't know what Marion's talking about—this tea is great."

"Let's find out Professor Duncan's opinion," Delphine said, taking up the three empty mugs. "He seems to enjoy tea."

"I'm not sure he'll drink any of this," Cosima said. "Have you noticed that he carries tea bags and makes his own tea?"

"No," Delphine said.

Cosima grinned and grabbed the kettle in one hand and her mug in the other. "Watch. He's going to ask for hot water only."

* 

Professor Duncan asked for hot water only and produced from his front pocket a thin tin canister from which he extracted a tea bag. Cosima shot Delphine a look of I told you so.
Meanwhile, Scott communed with the 1980s.

"I can't believe you got it to work," Cosima said, squinting at the bulky monitor.

"Yeah, I didn't think it was working, but Professor Duncan said this is what we're looking for."

"This is a synthetic sequence?" Cosima asked, turning to Professor Duncan. "Did you cook us up in alphabet soup?"

"It's encrypted with a Vigenère cipher, and I carry the key on me," Professor Duncan said, tapping his temple. He pulled out his notebook and a pen. "I'll need you to generate a transcription algorithm, Scott."

Scott grinned. "This is killer."

"What does this sequence do?" Cosima asked, more cautiously intrigued.

"This is the . . . sterility sequence," Professor Duncan answered, guarded as he raised his eyes from the notebook to Cosima. "Another of Susan's concepts. The theory was to degrade the endometrium and prevent ovarian follicles from maturing."

"Wow," Cosima straightened up, crossing her arms around her middle. "That's . . . wow. Horrifying. So the autoimmune condition was . . . programmed into us." Cosima stared at the wall for a moment, then turned to Professor Duncan. "Why take that path? Why not tweak our hormones, or modify our reproductive organs somehow?"

Professor Duncan pushed up his glasses. "Normal development was the prime directive. This was the least invasive solution that we could see. Unfortunately, we didn't, um, foresee the consequences."

"The unintended consequences—beyond rendering us infertile," Cosima said.

Professor Duncan blinked. "Yes."

Cosima turned away again, cocked her head, and whirled back around. "Did you want us to live long lives?"

"Of course."

"To prove that as your creations we could?" Cosima prodded. "To demonstrate that your science was sound?"

Professor Duncan nodded. "Yes. Proof of concept."

"Did you want us to live full lives?" Cosima asked.

Puzzlement pinched Professor Duncan's expression. He glanced up from writing. "Yes."

Cosima claimed a chair and hunched, shoulders bowed. "Because I imagine that this—" She gestured at the computer monitor. "—hit some of us really hard."

The pen stilled upon the paper.

Cosima pressed the palms of her hands together. "You intended for one of us to be your daughter. What were you going to tell her?"
"The truth," Professor Duncan said. "We wouldn't have hidden her biology from her and we would have explained the circumstances."

"That she and the rest of us weren't intended to reproduce," Cosima said.

"And that, like her mother and father, she could choose to have children via other means and that that child would be loved no more and no less, as we loved her," Professor Duncan said, eyebrows drawn. "As I should think you understand."

Cosima stared long and silently at Professor Duncan, who resumed transcribing the key of the cipher. Cosima hung her head, then stood, picked up the kettle, and walked out of the room without a word.

Delphine watched Cosima go and hesitated. The hesitation held Delphine in place and, after a second's consideration, there she remained, unable to gauge if Cosima sought a minute alone, unsure if anything she might say would be welcomed, uncertain she would find the acceptable words should Cosima feel attacked or combative.

But Cosima returned later than Delphine expected. She smiled and joked and punctuated with her hands, but Delphine thought she sensed a stiffness and withdrawal that mechanized the motions.

Delphine watched.

As the afternoon waned, Delphine approached Scott under the pretense of interest in the decryption process and pitched her voice low. "Scott, would you mind seeing that Professor Duncan gets home tonight?"

Scott peered up at Delphine in question.

Delphine smiled to set him at ease. "I think we could all use a short day—or a day with normal hours, at least. It's been a long week and now that we're finally here we can breathe a little easier and let the initial analyses run. And I'd like to see Cosima get a little more rest."

Scott nodded. "Okay. Yeah, no problem. You can count on me, Dr. Cormier."

"Thank you, Scott."

Scott smiled up at her.

The final trick was to convince Cosima.

"Would you like to get dinner?" Delphine asked her.

"Yeah, sure," Cosima agreed readily, obviating Delphine's prepared persuasive remarks and justifications. "What do you feel like getting?"

"I don't know," Delphine said, "but I was thinking about inviting Shay, so that it would be the three of us."

Cosima's eyebrows shot up. "Really?"

Delphine nodded. "Yes."

"I'm down for that," Cosima said, sounding almost cheery. Her gaze swept over their companions. "I'd hate for anyone to feel left out, though."

"I spoke to Scott," Delphine said. "He will stay with Professor Duncan and get him back to Mrs.
Cosima nodded. "Alright. I mean, Scott made it to my place in one piece with Professor Duncan, so they should be okay, right?"

Delphine nodded, because to disagree would derail her plans. "Let me see if Shay is available and we’ll go. Okay?"

Cosima grinned crookedly. "Lead the way, doctor."

The message caught Shay as she contemplated dinner options.

Hey. Do you have any plans tonight?

Shay smiled, assuming the identity of the sender at a glance, but blinked when a proper read exposed a mistake. The name on the screen seized her with amazement.

To Paul [5:17]: R u in Toronto?
From Paul [5:17]: Yeah. Are you free? Do you want to get dinner?
To Paul [5:18]: Omg why didn't u tell me u were coming?
From Paul [5:18]: Just passing through for work. Didn't know if I would have time to see you before my flight leaves tonight, so I thought it was better not to bother you earlier.
To Paul [5:19]: U could have mentioned it anyway, dork. Do u want to come over to my place?
From Paul [5:19]: Going out will be easier. I'll send you an address? Do you mind if it's somewhere close to the airport?

Shay didn't mind. Upon beholding her brother seated at the restaurant bar, a part of Shay wanted to smack him on the shoulder for thinking he shouldn't bother to contact her beforehand, but the impulse dissipated when Paul looked up, spotted her, and smiled in his quiet manner, a gentle light sparking in his eyes and a hint of uplift pulling at the corners of his mouth from beneath the cover of his groomed beard. He stood up and when Shay spread her arms Paul let her hug him, stiff at first, and then relaxing enough to lean over and engulf her. No bear hugs like Chris.

The day's travel left no mark on her brother. Paul projected neat from head to toe, in the maintenance of his low fade, the trim size of his spectacles, the shine of his shoes, and the tailored fit of his gray suit on his lean frame. Tidy, but unobtrusive. Paul wasn't one to stick out in a room, a circumstance he fostered through an unassuming, self-contained air. But Shay had learned to recognize that Paul's goal wasn't isolation, but curation—he dabbled in the company of his selection.

"Were you waiting long?" she asked him.

Paul shook his head. "Still waiting to get a table. Thanks for coming out all this way."

Shay smiled. "It's not that far."

"Do you want something from the bar?"

"What are you having?" Shay asked.

"Root beer."

Shay smiled. "You could have made it a float."
"I didn't want to ruin my appetite. Do you want anything?"

Shay contemplated Paul's glass of carbonated sugar water. "A Shirley Temple?"

Paul signalled the bartender. "Yeah? You don't want something harder?"

Shay shook her head, smiling to herself. "Nah. A Shirley Temple is fine."

The last time Shay'd had a Shirley Temple had been the last time she'd seen Paul. The first time had been a New Year's Eve when they were children. Shay didn't know why her parents had made an occasion of that particular New Year's Eve, perhaps in an effort to repair what Shay hadn't understood clearly was crumbling, but they'd gone to a fancy restaurant—or what her young mind had blown up into fancy—where her mother had ordered a cocktail. Shay had wanted to emulate her, so her father had ordered her a Shirley Temple. It sounded grown up and it looked magical, pink and bubbly, more magical than even the drink her mother got in a fancy glass. It was the only thing Shay remembered from that dinner and, later, when their parents separated, Shay had quietly sought it out again. But family dinners at fancy restaurants—the only places Shay thought Shirley Temples were attainable—had already been rare and were practically nonexistent when it was just her mom, Chris, Paul, and her. Shay had tried, sometimes, asking shyly at the counters of fast food restaurants and Paul must have noted it. Because it was Paul who presented her with a bubbly, pink beverage one night, complete with maraschino cherry and a straw.

Chris would have done the same in a heartbeat if Shay had asked. But Shay hadn't asked. And Paul was like that. Not effusive, not predictable, but capable of surprising in the most attentive ways, like learning the ingredients of a Shirley Temple, buying ginger ale and grenadine and maraschino cherries, and serving up Shirley Temples to his little sister until the grenadine ran out.

Yet somehow he was still surprised when she ordered it when they were together.

"Were you in Toronto on consultant work?" Shay asked.

Paul nodded. "Yeah. Sort of. More like pitching consultancy. Speaking of which, are you using a VPN like I told you to?"

"No," Shay told him honestly.

"Why not? It's so easy. Do you want me to set one up for you?"

"No, it's okay. I don't—like what's the point? What do I have to hide?"

"Your identity, your information, your privacy," Paul ticked off. "I got Chris and Nadia on board. Plus I got them a year of service for Nadia's birthday."

Shay clicked her tongue. "Of course. Nadia's firm didn't already have her using a VPN?"

"Yeah, she uses one on her company laptop for work, but now they're conscious of taking precautions in their everyday Internet use."

"You mean paranoid," Shay said.

"Not paranoid, smart," Paul said.

"Yeah, well, we know how it is with me and being smart."

"Hey," Paul said, forcing Shay to give him her attention. Chris would have chided, Don't talk like
that, but Paul subjected Shay to a quiet, prolonged assessment that was interrupted by a table being ready.

They gathered their drinks but left the topic behind at the bar. Perusal of the menu settled quiet contemplation at the table once they dismissed the appeal of appetizers. After they ordered, Shay snapped a picture of her brother giving her a little smirk.

"Nice," Shay said, drily.

"Don't post it," Paul said.

"I know, I know," Shay said, well versed in Paul's insistence on control of his privacy. "I might send it to Chris. Have you seen Chris and Nadia recently?"

Paul shook his head. "No, but Chris keeps inviting me out. They should give him a job on the board of tourism."

Shay grinned. "What would his selling point be? His PS4?"

Paul grinned back. "Did he offer you his old console when he upgraded?"

Shay laughed. "I told him I didn't have a TV."

"He still can't understand how you don't have a TV. I think he's going to buy you one sooner or later. Maybe for Christmas?"

Shay groaned softly. "If he asks you if that's a good gift idea, can you tell him no?"

"What do you have against TV?" Paul asked.

"I don't have anything against TV. I watch a lot of TV—on my laptop. That's enough for me."

"Yeah, the way Chris sees it, you don't have a TV, you don't have a gaming laptop, and you can't hook up a console to it, so Chris can't rope you into playing Diablo III with him."

"He's already beaten it," Shay scoffed.

"Not with all the classes.""He doesn't need me to do that," Shay said.

"But he thinks it would be more fun," Paul countered.

"Don't take his side," Shay scolded lightly.

"I'm taking my side," Paul declared. "If you play Diablo with him, he'll stop asking me to play it and I can convince him to play Dying Light instead."

"What's that?"

"A zombie apocalypse game, more or less."

Shay nodded skeptically. "Okay. Yeah. I don't think taking Diablo off the table is going to put that on the table for Chris."

"It's not like a horror game. It's . . . about as much horror as Diablo is."
"Diablo can be scary," Shay argued.

Paul shook his head. "Not anymore. They brightened all the colors and lighting."

"Yeah?"

"You could play it and see," suggested Paul.

Shay gave him a knowing tight-lipped smile for an answer.

"You really don't want a TV?" Paul asked.

"I don't need one," Shay assured him. "Besides, the only ones really worth getting are ones so big that they take up a whole wall. Where would I put it? And I can't just throw something that big into a trunk if I move."

Paul regarded her carefully. "Do you still like it here?"

"It's not the prairies."

"I thought you liked the prairies."

Shay lowered her gaze and shredded a piece of bread between her fingers. "Yeah, in a way, the openness. But now it feels . . . too small." She lifted her eyes. "You know." Paul's face belied nothing. "How do you like New York? My friend visited the city a few weeks ago."

"Which friend?"

"Alex."

Paul paused. "Was that someone you served with?"

"Yeah," Shay confirmed, breezily. Paul, Chris, their mom, they were all like this, wary to approach the relics of that portion of Shay's history. Only it wasn't history, not really, as it wasn't a dead thing so much as it was a distant thing, but Shay didn't know how to convey that, didn't know how to escort them into understanding a world to which they would remain outside. Their mom ignored it to the best of her ability, Paul respected it, like a sore spot to be given a berth, and then there were those like Chris, who wanted a way in but found themselves stranded.

"Did Alex like it?" Paul asked.

"I'm sure she did," Shay said with a crooked smile.

Paul nodded. "It's a good place to visit. You know, if you want to visit."

Shay threw her head back. "I get it, I get it."

"What I mean," Paul said, without a hint of teasing, "is that if you want to visit while you can still crash at my place, you might want to come soon."

Shay leaned forward. "What do you mean?"

"I've been thinking about taking a post in Hong Kong."

Shay's eyebrows rose. "Yeah?" She smiled. "I guess nothing's holding you back in New York."
"By which Shay meant someone more than something, but Paul merely lifted a shoulder in a shrug. "I could use a change."

"I'd miss you," Shay said.

"That's what you say, but you never come visit."

Shay pulled a face at him.

"Want to come along?" Paul asked. "We could learn Cantonese, get lost on the trains, figure out what's up with this minibus business I keep hearing about. You could study Chinese medicine. Are you still interested in that?"

Shay's mind lagged on her brother's invitation to join him in Hong Kong, that he seemed to be presenting it in earnest, that her first thought was of Delphine.

Paul watched her wrestling with her thoughts and asked, "Unless there's something keeping you here?"

Shay's lips parted until, finally, she exhaled, "Yeah. I think so. Maybe."

Paul smiled. "Maybe? What's going on?"

Shay's phone dinged. Shay glanced at it. "Do you mind if I check that?"

Paul lifted his chin in permission.

From Delphine [6:15]: Are you available for dinner?  
To Delphine [6:15]: Actually no.  
To Delphine [6:15]: I'm having dinner with my brother right now.  
From Delphine [6:16]: No???  
From Delphine [6:16]: Oh.  
From Delphine [6:16]: That's good. You didn't mention he was visiting.  
To Delphine [6:17]: I didn't know he was here until an hour ago.  
From Delphine [6:17]: I see.  
To Delphine [6:17]: He flies out tonight.

Shay set her phone aside, only for it to beep again. She picked it up with a tinge of sheepishness.

From Delphine [6:18]: I hate to say this about someone I've never met, but your brother has bad timing.  
To Delphine [6:18]: Sorry  
From Delphine [6:18]: It's fine.  
From Delphine [6:19]: His actions cannot be held against you.  
To Delphine [6:19]: Lol he's a good guy.  
From Delphine [6:19]: If you say so. Consuming carbohydrates will have to serve as consolation.  
To Delphine [6:19]: SORry!!!  
To Delphine [6:20]: Talk later?

When Shay put down her phone again, she noticed Paul watching her with a little smile. "Was that her?"

Shay nodded slowly, her smile bashful and self-deprecating. "Yeah."

Paul eyed her. "Do you want to talk about it?"
Shay canted her head. "It's sort of a new thing. I'm waiting to see how it goes."

Paul nodded. "Okay. Should I not mention it to anyone?"

Shay hesitated, though a part of her noted that at this point Chris would have nudged his way into more probing questions.

"I'll keep it between us," Paul said, saving Shay the trouble of answering. "Not that anyone would ask me."

"No one asks you because you don't talk about any of this stuff even when we do ask you." Shay smiled. "But thanks."

"You're one to talk," Paul said, with teasing dryness.

"Guess who I learned it from," Shay wheedled.

"Don't try to lay this on me," Paul said with a serene air of innocence. "You can't follow an example if you don't know someone is setting one."

Shay laughed at Paul's sense of supreme confidence. "Are you saying that you were so good at keeping your hookups secret that there's no way I could be copying what you did?"

Paul gave her a look that dared his little sister to refute her own words.

Shay shook her head, smiling at the challenge. "Just because I never said anything doesn't mean I didn't know that you and Jen had a thing. Or you and Leslie, from just down the hall. And possibly . . . Karen's roommate?" Or an inkling about what Paul and Stan, "we work out together," or Roger, "we met at a networking conference," might have been up to, for that matter.

Paul blinked at her. "Okay. So maybe I was more transparent than I thought."

Shay tilted her head in a touche.

Paul smiled to himself. "Well. I hope that if you want this that it works out for you. It would be nice to meet one of your girlfriends instead of just hearing about them coming and going."

"Now who's one to talk?" Shay fired back playfully.

Paul held up his palms. "But if you brought someone home, it would mean something."

"Um," Shay hummed, "if you brought someone home, everyone would lose their minds."

"The difference being that I don't want to bring anyone home," Paul said, frank. He sipped at his root beer as Shay struggled with stunned silence. "I don't need the same things from people that you do, or Chris, for that matter. I always felt that, of everyone, you understood that."

Shay pressed her lips into a line. "We've never talked about it."

Paul smiled. "I never felt like we had to. Chris . . . he asks, sometimes, and I can tell he asks me the same way he asks you. With this . . . expectation. You don't have it anymore. You haven't, for a long time."

Shay held Paul's genial gaze. At last, she nodded. "I didn't think it mattered. You've always done your own thing and . . . I never sensed you were unhappy about it." Shay paused. "Are you happy?"
Paul turned his hands up, smile still in place. "I'm not sad."

Shay smiled. "Not that you would tell me if you were sad."

"I might," Paul said. "Maybe after the fact."

"Yeah?" Shay challenged. "When were you last sad?"

Paul ran his hand over his hair. "I lost my favorite pair of earphones a few weeks back. They must have fallen out of my pocket on the subway or something. It was a huge bummer when I realized it."

"That sucks. Did you get a new pair?"

"Yeah, but they're not the same. Literally not the same—a different type. I picked them up just to have a pair. I haven't decided if I like them yet."

Shay smiled. She contemplated her mocktail. "It's okay to let me know if you're ever in Toronto, even if we can't see each other."

Paul shrugged. "I didn't want you to make plans and then have to cancel on you."

"It's nice just knowing you're around," Shay assured him.

"Alright." Paul smiled. "So . . . have you seen any good movies lately?"

Shay laughed at the abrupt change in topic, but was happy to go along. "I'm so behind on movies. I swear I watch everything months and years after everyone else. I haven't even read all the books you and Chris have sent me. Have you seen anything good lately?"

Paul shrugged. "I've been to some good concerts."

"Yeah?" Their food arrived and, settling in, Shay picked up the thread, "Which ones? Are they all bands I've never heard of?"

Paul picked up a french fry with a smirk. "They're not all bands in the Top Forty Hits, if that's what you mean."

"That's not what I meant," Shay said.

"And most of them haven't been around for thirty years," Paul continued.

"Shut up," Shay chastised with a smile.

Paul smiled and for the time remaining to them the Davydov siblings entertained pleasant and innocuous topics—while the ones revealed and revealing were tucked away, guarded in confidence and beyond the necessity of mention, appreciated as tokens of trust between a little sister and her big brother.

* *

Dinner occurred regardless of Shay's absence. Cosima showed no signs of dismay at the reduction of their proposed party, but Delphine quietly nursed the small grievance. She didn't believe in a cosmic force interested in or capable of engineering vindictive campaigns against individuals, but if she had, the last week would have victimized her to the point of confirmation. In one aspect, at least.

Shortly after they were underway, Delphine glancing once at the glove compartment, Cosima
decided against the scheme for Italian and suggested they investigate an Ethiopian restaurant. With no reason to object, Delphine entrusted Cosima to direct them to their new destination.

The number of vegetarian options on the menu magnified Delphine's regret that Shay couldn't join them.

"If you like the food, you can bring Shay here some other time," Cosima said after they ordered.

Delphine rested her chin in a hand and smiled, wan. "Yes. We could bring her here."

"We, huh?" Cosima said.

Delphine raised an eyebrow at the archness in Cosima's tone.

"Why did you want to invite Shay?" Cosima asked.

Delphine shrugged. "I haven't seen her this week."

Cosima waved a hand. "Okay, let me revise that. Why did you want to invite her to a dinner with me?"

Delphine shook her head to the extent permitted by her resting chin. "I thought you would enjoy her company."

Cosima studied Delphine. "That bad, huh?"

"What do you mean?"

"Did you get the impression that I was feeling so bad that you thought you'd bring in Shay to play cheerleader?" Cosima cocked her head. "So bad that you considered it was okay to share Shay?"

Delphine held still for a second. "Shay isn't . . . I can't share her or not share her. That she was busy tonight with her own plans is proof."

"I know. The other day she offered to share her dinner with me. But just because she's her own actual person capable of making her own choices doesn't mean that you don't try to not share her," Cosima said. "Or, at the least, take steps to never actively bring her and me together. Like I'm the bogeyman and not, you know, the DYAD and those creeps."

Delphine sat quiet, attempting to assess the depth of Cosima's frustration, unwilling to accept Cosima's jocular tone at face value. "I find that spending time with Shay often cheers me up. I thought maybe if she had the same effect on you, it would be nice to have dinner together. Faire d'une pierre deux coups."

"Kill two birds with one stone?" Cosima asked. "I think that's the first time I've heard you speak French."

"This may surprise you, but I do have some familiarity with that language."

Cosima smirked.

Delphine poked at the condensation forming on the surface of her glass of iced water. Her judgment hazarded that though Cosima's anger was not quite diffused, it was somewhat cooled—enough to speak more frankly. "What you said to Professor Duncan about the sterility sequence . . . I'd had a similar thought when I spoke to him earlier."
The smirk fled Cosima's lips. "Yeah."

Delphine found nothing more substantive to contribute on the topic and retreated into tired silence.

But Cosima wasn't done. "It wasn't the sterility concept—or not just that. Like, yeah, that's pretty screwed up and horrific, and now we, me and my sisters, are all living that reality that . . . wasn't something that seemed awful to them—to Ethan and Susan—when they came up with it. Like, that says a lot about them. But, you know, on some level, I can understand that. I get that thirty years ago they thought this was, like, a first step and so they put in this . . . safety measure to keep this stage contained. They had an idea about how to do it and they actually, like, you know, accomplished it. It worked. We're sterile. And we developed into adults and survived thirty years before it came back to haunt us. But, like, today I—I heard Professor Duncan talking and I watched him saying those things and . . ." Cosima covered her mouth. Her breaths came in short bursts. She shook her head. "He doesn't see the sterility as a bad thing. He regrets the vector is killing us now, but he sees it as a side effect of their success. Like they failed forward. And—" Cosima found Delphine's eyes. "I didn't know what to feel.

"A part of me admires them. What they did, at the time they did it, with the resources they had—it's incredible. They were so far ahead of their time. And I see how badly Professor Duncan wants to see Rachel again—and I've seen how Marion is with Charlotte—and I think, yeah, they must have cared, right? That we weren't just subjects, not just experiments. But in their eyes we're not just people, either . . . or maybe they see everyone, every human being, in that way. That the functions of our bodies are just . . . that. Things to be tweaked and manipulated. Shaped. Switched on and off. Is that all we've ever been trying to do? Making clones, curing cancer, slowing aging—are we just fighting biology?"

Delphine resisted a frown.

"But it's like I thought all of that while I was looking at Professor Duncan, and I couldn't . . . I couldn't say it. It's like I didn't want to hurt his feelings." Cosima gasped out a bitter laugh. "Like if it had been Leekie or . . . or you . . . I wouldn't have held back, but with him it felt like . . . yelling at my dad or grandfather or something. I didn't know I thought of him that way until that moment. Isn't that stupid?"

"He had a part in making you," Delphine said quietly.

"Yeah, and he fucked it up!" Cosima exclaimed. She rubbed at her forehead and exhaled sharply. "Like parents do, I guess. But, like, why weren't they better, you know? They had all these tools at their fingertips. They made choices about our biology. This is why people are afraid of machines gaining self-awareness and intelligence. Like we're going to build these powerful creations that are going to realize we suck."

Sadness curled in Delphine's heart. "Would you stop the path of our technological advancements if you could?"

Cosima pressed a hand upon her dreads. "There has to be a better way. A responsible way. Right? We don't have to do this shit in secret and lie to the people putting themselves in our hands."

"Would you continue where Project Leda has left off?" Delphine wondered.

Cosima grimaced. "I sure as hell wouldn't make women surrogate mothers without their knowledge or monitor their kids without permission or break into people's homes at night to examine them in their sleep."
"I meant what they achieved in terms of genetic engineering," Delphine said. "Now that there is CRISPR—"

"Yeah, I know. Designer babies." Cosima stared past Delphine, anger and uncertainty mingled on the shelf of her brow. "I don't know, dude. I guess I survive this first and then—and then I'll see." Cosima's gaze cut to Delphine. "What about you? Where do you go after this?"

Delphine shook her head. "I don't know."

Cosima smirked. "You have your medical license. You could run off into the countryside and become the hot local doctor."

"Unless my license is revoked," Delphine remarked.

Confusion narrowed Cosima's eyes. "Why would that happen? Unless this whole conspiracy gets exposed."

Delphine turned her glass in place. "You don't think that could happen?"

"Do you think that someone like Marion Bowles would let that happen?" Cosima shook her head. "I mean, if there were any justice in the world . . ."

"Everyone would be jailed?" Delphine finished, daring a look at Cosima.

Cosima leaned back in her seat and crossed her arms. "The problem is that everyone at the top—everyone who really deserves to be in jail—will go underground at the first whiff of exposure and get away scot free with their nest eggs of millions of dollars to see them through. They'll lose power, maybe, but not their comforts. That's the injustice."

"While the rest of us would not be comfortable?" suggested Delphine, but lightly to blunt any edge.

Cosima froze, expression blanked, then eased back with a short sigh and a little smirk. "I'm not a lawyer, but I understand that there are things like plea bargains and immunity deals you can strike for selling out the bigger fish."

"Who . . . would have fled with their nest eggs?" Delphine supplemented, puzzled.

Cosima laughed. "Yeah. I guess so. But you never know. The stronger the case authorities build against them, the greater the incentive to catch them."

"I'll . . . keep that in mind," Delphine said. "In case I need it."

Cosima regarded Delphine in a long, silent evaluation. At its conclusion, Cosima said, "Thanks for getting me out of there today."

"You're welcome," Delphine said.

But it wasn't the unexpected admission of gratitude on which Delphine dwelled, but the reminder that her own time might be limited and thus not to be squandered. She felt more keenly the diminution of a table for two intended to accommodate three and could not help but mind the minutes until she might again share the company of the dinner's missing element.
Chapter 47

Chapter Notes

Stop!

This chapter is the second part of a two-part update. If you have not read the first part (or aren't sure if you have), please go back and check out Chapter 46. :)

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Shay dropped Paul off at the airport terminal with a final hug that Paul initiated, grasping her tight like Chris would have.

"Take care," he told her.

"I will. Don't run off to Hong Kong without letting me know," she warned him.

Paul laughed. "Come out to New York sooner rather than later." He pulled back with a mischievous smile. "You can bring someone if you want."

"Get out of here," she shooed him.

Paul waved once at the doors and disappeared inside. Shay climbed back inside her car and took a moment to contemplate her phone.

To Delphine [7:47]: Did u get dinner?
From Delphine [7:48]: Yes. It contained less carbohydrates than I expected.
From Delphine [7:48]: Is dinner with your brother finished?
To Delphine [7:49]: Yeah. Just dropped him off at airport.
From Delphine [7:49]: Are you available the rest of the evening?
To Delphine [7:49]: Yes.
From Delphine [7:49]: May I come over?
To Delphine [7:50]: I have to race u back. I'll be home in like 40 min
From Delphine [7:50]: Don't race me. Dinner is not finished yet. You can have an hour or more.
From Delphine [7:50]: I'll see you soon.
To Delphine [7:51]: Ok. Drive carefully.

Even with light traffic Shay exceeded her ballpark ETA. Judging she still had time, Shay brushed her teeth and was dabbing her face dry when the knock fell on her door.

A smile seized Shay's mouth. The futility of her reaction reflected how easily Paul had read her and Shay spared a second to laugh at herself as she hung up the towel. The smile remained on her lips as Shay hurried to the door.

"Hey," she greeted Delphine, voice falling hushed as if she'd run out of breath.

"Hello," Delphine said, stepping inside to claim Shay's lips.
When Delphine ceded an inch for oxygen, Shay began, "How—"

Delphine leaned back in, moving closer, and barred any subsequent words. Shay indulged the exploration, hand finding a hold on Delphine's lapel, but won some space as Delphine pulled back to adjust her angle of approach. "I—"

Delphine pressed her fingertips to Shay's lips, stilling them.

"Delphine—"

"Shhh," breathed Delphine.

Shay shhh'd for a second, lips twitching into an uncertain smile. "What's—"

The pressure upon Shay's lips increased insistently until all movement ceased. They stood quiet and looking at one another. Delphine's gaze traveled languidly over Shay's face, drifted low, back up, on a meandering course Shay couldn't chart. Delphine traced the curve of Shay's lips, wrapped around to follow her jaw, tucking beneath Shay's chin.

"What are you doing?" Shay asked.

"I have not seen you for a week—"

"A few days," corrected Shay.

"—so I am taking in the sight of you and visualizing."

"Visualizing?"

Delphine reached out with both hands towards Shay's waist, pinched the sides of Shay's loose blouse along the seams, and folded back each side so that the fabric stretched taut across the curves of Shay's torso.

"Mmm," Delphine hummed, a substitute for confirmation and contemplation.

"What are you visualizing?" hazarded Shay.

"When I was going through physical therapy," Delphine said, eyes keen on the effect of her adjustments, "my therapist encouraged me to get through the exercises by telling me to visualize the movements. He wanted me to picture them first in my mind, imagine each step, from start to finish."

"Okay," Shay said in a near whisper. "What are you visualizing?"

"What it would be like to undress you. What you look like beneath your clothes."

Shay's throat demanded moisture. "Yeah?" Her voice cracked on the word.

Delphine's fingertips skimmed the circumference of Shay's waistline as she released Shay's blouse. "Where I should kiss you. Your lips. Your chin? Your neck? Your shoulder—here?" Delphine brushed her hand across Shay's left shoulder.

Shay sucked on her lips. "That's, uh—"

Delphine's eyes found Shay's. "I've thought about it."

Shay scrambled for words.
"In case you were wondering," added Delphine.

Shay exhaled unevenly. Delphine watched her with pinpoint attention. Shay had to break eye contact. She focused on the task of smoothing down Delphine’s coat.

"Shay," Delphine breathed her name. Shay raised her eyes. "Do you want to have sex with me?"

The bluntness of the inquiry, regardless of Delphine’s soft tone, stole Shay’s breath.

Delphine continued. "I don't ask that to rush you." Her quiet confidence fractured. "I . . . I don't know how to tell."

Shay laughed. A nervous titter. At herself. At the self-evident notion that Delphine had likely never been left in doubt of someone's sexual interest in her.

But Delphine's eyes harbored no mirth. She looked lost.

Shay swallowed. She touched Delphine's face. The admission tumbled out: "I'm nervous."

"Nervous?" Delphine echoed. "About—?" Delphine paused, the topic suspended in her hesitation. "About sex? Or about me?"

"Yes," Shay exhaled. This wasn't the turn in the evening she could have foreseen.

Delphine's forehead contracted. "Which one?"

"Both. And other factors."

"Other factors?"

"Me. Us. I don't know."

Delphine gazed at Shay steadily.

"Okay," Shay said, "I do know."

Delphine opened her mouth but emitted no sound. Then she gasped in a puff of laughter and shook her head. "Coming here I thought—because maybe I might not have many chances—if I could bypass the talking . . ." Delphine smiled. "But somehow you've led me to this moment where I have to ask what you mean."

Shay smiled back. "I'm still reeling from the fact that you asked me if I wanted to have sex with you."

Delphine held Shay's gaze. "What did you mean?"

"Can we close my front door first?" Shay asked.

The door was closed. Shay took Delphine's hand and led her to the couch. Delphine sank down beside Shay without complaint, objection, or remark. The interrupted conversation lay inert between them.

Shay ventured forth. "Have you really—visualized . . . having sex with me?"

Delphine gazed searchingly at Shay. "Of course."
"Really?"

Delphine nodded, bewildered. "Yes. Haven't you thought about it?"

"No."

Delphine paused. "Is that—usual for you?"

"No," Shay said.

"So it's me," Delphine concluded.

Shay took a deep breath. "I spent a long time forbidding my imagination from going down that path. Regarding you."

"But... there's no reason to prevent yourself now," Delphine said.

Shay nodded in vague agreement. "And now that I don't have to, I—it's hard for me to imagine it."

Delphine's air of confusion grew.

"I—" Shay filled her lungs and exhaled in a rush. "I don't really like the thought of being someone's first."

"This may shock you," Delphine presented gently, "but I've had sex before."

"But not with a woman," Shay was quick to correct.

Delphine stared at Shay. Her gaze slipped to Shay's lips and Shay knew the thought in Delphine's mind. That everything could be tested and swept aside in a moment. This moment.

Shay clutched Delphine's hand. "I'm scared it—"

Delphine squeezed Shay's fingers, firmly, truncating Shay's speech.

Shay closed her eyes and sought the fulcrum of her thoughts, balancing her nerves and the truth and this moment. Opening her eyes, she said, with a tremor, "You might not like it."

And where would that leave Shay? In too deep. Far too deep.

Delphine reached up with her free hand and touched Shay's cheek. "I like you." Delphine's eyes mined the depths of Shay's. "So much." Delphine smiled. "And somehow more and more."

Shay inhaled—and dared herself to believe. She kissed Delphine. With all the threads of longing and desire and uncertainty. Delphine leaned back and absorbed the deluge, free hand skimming the top of Shay's thigh—and gripping tight for purchase and balance, stealing Shay's breath. Shay leaned into Delphine, bracing herself on the couch cushion, freeing her fingers from Delphine's to seek anchorage on the other side of Delphine's body, pulse leaping quick in her veins.

The crash of a backrest pillow toppling to the floor made them both start. They looked to it, then back to each other. Delphine smiled up at Shay. "This is a very dangerous couch."

"So someone keeps telling me," Shay said with a smirk.

Delphine's thumb stroked along the curve of Shay's hip. Surrendering to a smile, Shay leaned down, settled her forehead against Delphine's, and closed her eyes. She opened her eyes when Delphine
shifted beneath her and she felt a peck graze her chin. Straightening her arms to lever herself up, Shay contemplated Delphine.

"What did you imagine it would be like?" Shay asked in a low voice. "What did you want to do?"

The smile that claimed Delphine's lips was slow and sly in its inception. "I imagined . . . kissing you. Many times. Not just once or twice."

"Yeah? Like how?"

Delphine reached up, cupped Shay's cheek, and guided her down for a languid kiss. The second kiss clipped the corner of Shay's mouth, over the twin beauty marks dotted close by. The next found Shay's jawline and the following Shay's neck. Shay hummed at a thoughtful pitch.

"I see," Shay said.

"Then, in most scenarios, followed some undressing," Delphine murmured.

"Really?" Shay said, straightening up. "Just like that?"

"Well," Delphine said, sounding a little confused, "there was also more room—because this couch was not involved—and you weren't half on my lap, like this, but rather—" Delphine's brow bent. "Astride? Is that the word?"

"That word works," Shay assured her. "Though you've probably heard 'straddle.'"

Delphine eyes lit up. "Yes. That one. You were strad—" Delphine frowned. "It's a verb?"

Shay smiled. "Yes."

"You were . . . straddling . . ." Delphine attempted, trailing off. "The pronunciation of that word is awkward. Strad. Ling."

Shay giggled. "I think this is the first time I've heard you struggle to pronounce an English word." She plopped a kiss onto the tip of Delphine's nose. "As you know, your English is excellent."

Delphine's nose scrunched with irritation.

"You shouldn't knock tight spaces," added Shay. "They can force you to be . . . creative."

"This is not a tight space," Delphine said with notes of residual grumpiness. "It's a lack of space. It's one pivot from a fall."

Shay eyed Delphine dubiously. "What have you been imagining?"

"It usually involves a bed."

"Usually?"

"Well, your table is so high and narrow—"

Shay sat back, overcome with laughter.

"I'm not saying it's not possible," Delphine elaborated, "but it's not optimal."

With a sigh Shay settled down. "Well, I guess that depends on what you were imagining . . ."
Shay stood up and stretched out hand to assist Delphine to her feet.

"So," Shay said, "the bed?"

Delphine gazed down into Shay's eyes. "I won't rush you. I'm not in a rush."

Shay smiled, thumb stroking Delphine's hand in hers. "So . . . the bed?"

* 

It was just as well Delphine had no intention to hurry Shay, because Shay would not be hurried. Deliberation infused every action. Shay took Delphine's coat and placed it carefully aside on the couch, eyes transfixed on Delphine's form, and held out a hand for Delphine's blazer. The weight of Shay's consideration approached a tangible sensation that prickled across Delphine's skin, a consciousness that Shay was looking at her for the first time with calculation and intent. Delphine's pulse accelerated, but her movements to remove her blazer were measured. Shay laid it out beside Delphine's coat to avoid wrinkles and pressed close, hands alighting on Delphine's hips, urging Delphine backwards in small, incremental steps as if they were slow dancing. In the direction of the bed. Shay contemplated Delphine's blouse, lips pursing.

Shay plucked at the hem. "No buttons."

"Is that a problem?" Delphine wondered.

"Well . . . I can't really help you out of it," Shay said. Shay peeked down at Delphine's feet. "Especially since you're still in those shoes."

Delphine laughed.

Shay leaned back to look into Delphine's face. "Those should come off, too."

The shoes came off, followed by Delphine's socks and blouse. There was a change in Shay's gaze, intent on Delphine's bared stomach, and her fingertips on Delphine's torso managed to be both hesitant and a tease. Delphine was acutely aware of the bra she was wearing, unremarkable and comfortable when she put it on that morning, a soft pastel so as not to show through her blouse. At which point it occurred to Delphine to ask, "What about your clothes?"

Shay smiled to herself. "Everything in its time."

"Is that a koan?"

Shay's head snapped up, shock in her expression. It melted into a smile. "You get me every time."

Delphine raised an eyebrow. "That is a koan?"

"No," Shay said with laughter in her voice. "Not as far as I know. I meant that you always manage to surprise me with how much you know. Like that you know what a koan is."

"You knew what I was referring to," Delphine pointed out.

"Yeah, but . . . I don't know anything about, say, surgery or gene modification."

"You know about human anatomy."

"Because that's knowledge I need in my field."
"I meant," Delphine said evenly, "that I am currently very interested in your knowledge of human anatomy."

Shay's lips parted. Delphine kissed her before more words might escape.

Shay's hands accrued growing surety in probing the planes of Delphine's waist, but Delphine's fingers snuck beneath Shay's blouse in a sting of counterintelligence that sparked a sharp inhalation, then a smile against Delphine's lips.

"The time for your clothes to come off is now," Delphine whispered against Shay's mouth.

"That was fast," Shay remarked. But she lifted her arms.

The weight of Delphine's belt sent her loosened slacks straight to the floor with a satisfying thump of the buckle against the wooden slats. Delphine looked down at her tangled ankles, laughing, as she stepped free, hands on Shay's shoulders for balance.

But Shay's jeans resisted Delphine's blind insistence until Delphine pulled back with frustration.

"Why—" Delphine began, tugging at the denim waistband, and stopped, stilling. "Shay."

"Yeah?"

Delphine ran her thumb over Shay's hip. Reflex saw Shay shy away from the light touch. "You have a tattoo."

"I do," Shay said.

"I didn't know this."

Shay grinned. "I'm not sure why you would."

"Exactly," Delphine said, tone faintly scolding. She touched the raised skin again, the ink infused in the dermis black and stark against Shay's complexion. "You never said anything about it."

"I'm not sure what circumstances would have made me mention it," Shay said, a giggle couched in her voice. "There really wasn't an opportunity to blurt out, 'Hey, guess what? I have a tattoo.'"

"You could have said it just like that," Delphine said.

Shay smiled. "It's not like you showed interests in tattoos. You've never commented on Cosima's."

"They're Cosima's," Delphine replied, more absent than dismissive. Delphine pressed her fingers firmly to the end of the ink-rendered feather and traced the shaft, displacing the band of Shay's underwear to do so. "I didn't know that saying anything would mean learning something. I didn't know to ask."

Perhaps her voice sounded troubled. Shay touched Delphine's face, drawing her attention.

"Now you know. Not many do."
They made it to the edge of the bed still clothed in lingerie. Shay's every nerve felt attuned to gauging Delphine's level of comfort, but the thorough visual study Delphine conducted led Shay to suspect that Delphine had little regard for her own degree of undress. Shay had seen hunger before, and lust, but Delphine's gaze held a measure of something else. The tattoo held endless fascination for her, a facet of Shay's body to which Delphine gravitated, fingers learning the scarification the hefty needle had left behind, as if some secret lurked in the inky depths that could be revealed with enough smoothing.

Shay touched the small scar on Delphine's chest. The surgery scars she knew well, the legacy of incisions through hip and shoulder, the sensation of them beneath her fingers, but the little one on Delphine's sternum was foreign to Shay's touch.

"Was this also from the accident?" Shay asked.

"No," Delphine answered.

No elaboration followed. Shay thought of pursuing it. Thought again.

The mattress waited.

\*\*

Shay paused with a knee on the mattress. "Is it okay to leave the lights on?"

Delphine lifted an eyebrow. "Is it okay for you?"

"I don't mind either way, but I don't know if you're more comfortable with the lights off."

Delphine smiled, gaze straying to Shay's hip. "It's fine to leave them on."

\*\*

Shay ran her hand along the length of Delphine's leg from ankle to knee. Then paused. Again.

"What is it?" Delphine asked.

"I didn't shave today," Shay said.

"What?"

"Or yesterday. I'm not sure about the day before that. Fair warning."

"Why?"

"I don't know. You might be expecting silky smoothness instead of prickly pear? Which is a cactus. I mean—you shaved today. Clearly."

"Shay."

"Yeah?"

"Come here."

\*\*

Words didn't cease. Temptation (and teasing) fostered the urge to tell Shay that she talked too much,
but the truth of Shay's care and caution, that it was for Delphine's benefit, held Delphine's tongue. Because of course things between them should proceed with words.

"Tell me," Shay said, her leg sliding between Delphine's thighs as she leaned over Delphine, "what you like and what you don't. Let me know what feels good."

Delphine chuckled, low in her throat. "That sounds familiar. Help you help me."

Shay shook her head. "Not quite like that."

"I hope not," Delphine said in a tone that struck a spark in Shay's eyes.

Shay bent down and kissed Delphine's neck. Sucked, gently, at the beat of Delphine's pulse surging loud in Delphine's ears. If words remained in Delphine's vocabulary they amounted to no more than at last.

* 

But Shay's hands were so careful. So careful. Brushing over Delphine's bra. Too lightly. Establishing too little contact.

"Take it off," breathed Delphine.

Shay paused. "What?"

"Just take it off."

"I wasn't sure if—"

"Shay."

Shay pulled back with a smile. "Are you—"

"That game can be turned around very easily," Delphine warned.

"Sorry, sorry," Shay murmured in conciliation, still smiling, and kissed Delphine contritely.

Then Shay took off Delphine's bra and revisited Delphine's breasts with renewed, quiet, focused appreciation.

Delphine told her, "Harder."

Shay responded by using her mouth.

* 

At the back of Shay's mind:

Delphine had never expressed interest in matters of sex, much less desire for it or enthusiasm.

(Please don't let Delphine feel pressured into having sex with her.)

* 

The truth, however, was simple:

Sex with Shay was not categorically different in the physical realm. When Shay's fingers pressed and
slipped against Delphine's clitoris through her underwear, Delphine inhaled sharply, and when, with a look of permission, Shay slid off the garment and tossed it aside and, eyes finding Delphine's, placed her mouth upon the cluster of sensitive nerves and licked and sucked, Delphine closed her eyes and rocked her hips to find an angle and a rhythm—but it was not a wholly new experience.

Shay was.

* *

Delphine gave no indication she wanted Shay to stop. She released soft gasps and utterances of "yes." Writhed between and into Shay's hands. Strained for contact. Toes curling. Fingers twining through Shay's hair.

Shay had expected Delphine to be reserved or shy.

Instead, for a moment, Shay wondered what her neighbors might think.

* *

Because when Delphine looked into Shay's eyes, as Shay wiped her chin and licked her lips, fingers of her other hand parting Delphine's labia and the question sounding soft over the rush of Delphine's pulse—"Is this okay?"—it wasn't ego that shone in the earnest of Shay's gaze but a concern wholly absorbed with Delphine's comfort and satisfaction.

Which was perhaps scary in its way.

That there could be no doubt that Shay saw Delphine.

That hiding would be so hard.

* *

But what Shay offered next was not what Delphine wanted. Delphine wanted to kiss Shay slow, hands brushing back Shay's loose and tangled hair—which Shay had considered tying back—and holding Shay in place forehead-to-forehead as Delphine caught her breath.

"What do you like?" Delphine asked softly.

Shay resisted the impulse to pull out of Delphine's grip. "Delphine, you don't have to—"

"Seriously?"

"There's time—there will be other times—"

"There's right now."

"I know," Shay said lowly.

"You don't think I can?"

Shay shook her head in the limited space. "This isn't a challenge or a competition."

Delphine's eyes narrowed in consideration. "It could be."

"I'm not making it one," Shay said emphatically.
Delphine smiled.

A challenge was a better—easier—way to frame an approach to this part, the genuine new experience, the softness and the **slightness** of Shay against Delphine's hands, the tease of Shay's arms butterflied as Shay sat up and undid the clasp of her bra, the way Shay guided Delphine's hands away from her underwear, whispering, "Later."

Delphine had been exposed to countless bodies, but exploring Shay's required a remapping of flesh. The way Shay's ribs swelled into breasts that fit into the cups of Delphine's hands. The response of Shay's nipples to a swipe, a pinch, tautening, and the encouragement of Shay's fingers on Delphine's nape when Delphine gave an experimental suck, a hiss when Delphine encircled the nub with her tongue. The length of Shay's neck when tipped back to grant Delphine access. The ease with which redness rose to the surface of Shay's complexion when Delphine sucked on the junction of Shay's neck and shoulder. The tickle of small hairs against Delphine's legs as she rolled their bodies to gain leverage and their legs tangled.

Delphine giggled above Shay. "It tickles."

"What tickles?"

"Your legs."

Shay threw her head back with a small groan of disgust. "See? I warned you!"

Delphine grinned. "I don't care."

She didn't care.

"What do you like?" Delphine said. "Tell me. Show me."

Shay touched Delphine's face and assured her, "You're doing fine. Take your time. If you hurt me or I don't like it, I'll let you know. We'll find out how we work together."

However, when Delphine dipped her hand between Shay's legs, fingertips venturing, Shay tensed without a word. Delphine stopped, brow dipping.

"Is something wrong?" Delphine asked.

"Nothing's wrong," Shay said.

Delphine searched Shay's gaze. "Is penetration okay? Do you—do you like it?"

"Yes," Shay said quietly. Delphine felt the space trailing her words.

"But?"

Shay licked her lips. "It's—" She was quiet, breaths uneven, and then said, "It can take a lot of work. With me."

Myriad responses darted across Delphine's tongue, and a number of questions, but she said, "Show
me. Tell me what to do."

* 

Delphine's expression was so serious and intent that Shay laughed. Delphine's composure faltered. Shay reached up quickly to caress Delphine's face. 

"You're fine, you're fine. I shouldn't have—I sounded way too serious. I'm sorry." Shay cupped Delphine's face between both hands. She stroked Delphine's cheek. "Tonight has already been more than I could have asked for."

Delphine turned her head and kissed the palm of Shay's hand. "You can ask for more. I want to give you more. A lot more."

Shay's smiled widened. "Okay, but . . . you'll have to start slow."

"Ah, I understand now," breathed Delphine. "You kept telling me to go slow to prepare me for this moment. After hearing you say go slow so many times, I'm trained to listen and obey."

Shay shook her head, grin irrepressibly in place. "You have to go slow so I can keep up with that brain of yours."

"No need to keep up with my brain—just direct it or distract it."

"'Kay," Shay said and pulled Delphine down for a kiss.

* 

Shay didn't lie and this warning was fair. But Shay was a patient instructor and Delphine had a reputation of overachievement to substantiate.

* 

Shay's thumb stroked the back of Delphine's neck as her heart and breaths calmed. Delphine watched her attentively. Shay smiled up at Delphine and pulled herself up to plant a kiss on Delphine's nose.

"How are you feeling?" Shay asked.

"Anxious to know how you're feeling," Delphine replied.

Shay smiled and pushed Delphine's loose hair back against gravity. "That's why I asked you, because I wasn't sure how I should be feeling."

"What do you mean?" Delphine asked.

Shay studied Delphine's lips, a bit bruised for wear. She suspected once she looked in a mirror that she'd find herself bruised in similar and compromising fashion. "I feel . . . happy. But like a conditional happy. Like a happy I can feel once I find out how you feel."

A tremor ran through Delphine's bottom lip. Concern propelled Shay into a frantic search of Delphine's gaze.

"Sorry," Delphine whispered, voice skirting on hoarse. She cleared her throat and wrangled her composure together. "To hear you say that makes me happy."
"Did you like it?" Shay asked softly.

"Yes," Delphine said. "I like you very much. I like being with you like this."

Shay smiled, but it slipped for a moment. "How's your back?"

"It feels okay," Delphine said.

"Let me see."

Delphine moved off of Shay and twisted to display her back. Shay hissed softly and prodded one of the raised red welts. "I'm sorry. My nails are—not as short as they should be. It doesn't hurt?"

"I heard once a child say something to his mother . . ."

Shay raised an eyebrow. "What?"

Delphine smiled over her shoulder. "Kiss it and make it better."

Shay clucked. But she kissed Delphine's shoulder.

Lying next to one another, Delphine stroking Shay's arm, Shay wore a faint smile. Yet her gaze appeared distant, drawn inward.

"What are you thinking?" Delphine asked.

Shay blinked her eyes into focus on Delphine. Her smile widened.

"What?" Delphine prompted.

Shay said, "That I need a shower."

"What?" Delphine guffawed, raising her head to accentuate her disbelief. "Really?"

Shay laughed. "Yes. Just a—a body shower. To get all this sweat off. It doesn't bother you, feeling so sweaty?"

"Do you usually shower after sex?"

"Not usually but—a lot of times I'd like to."

Delphine's eyes narrowed with playful suspicion on Shay. "Are you trying to wash me off?"

"No," Shay said, "I'd ask you if you want to join me."

Delphine smiled. "Because if I didn't shower, then you'd be clean and I'd be sweaty, and then you'd get dirty again when I tried to hold you?"

Shay made a face. "Do you want to go take a shower?"

"What about the bathtub?" Delphine asked.

"No, that's—" Shay stopped, seeing Delphine's grin, a surefire indicator of Delphine's relentless teasing. Shay rolled her eyes. "Shower, yes or no?"
"If I say no, am I not allowed to cuddle with you?" Delphine asked.

"Since you brought it up," Shay drawled, "no, you may not."

Delphine grinned. "Then what choice do I have?"

Eyeing the pinkness of the scratches across Delphine's back, Shay gingerly raised her lathered hands to Delphine's back and was greeted with a hiss upon contact. Shay started, pulling away quickly, only for Delphine to turn a grin on her, chuckling.

"No, it's fine, it doesn't hurt," Delphine said.

"Don't do that," Shay said, swallowing her heart and exhaling in relief and exasperation. "Like, I can deal with a lot of your teasing but—not that."

Their eyes met. Delphine gazed at her, playfulness bleeding into sincerity, which concluded with contrition. "Okay."

Shay nodded and rebuilt a lather between her hands. "Okay."

Under the spray, soap suds sliding over skin, Delphine's fingers grazed Shay's tattoo, considering, lingering, pondering. Shay watched Delphine's face in expectation but Delphine guarded her thoughts.

"You were serious about a quick shower," Delphine said, toweling water off her arms.

"Because it's cold in the shower with two people," Shay said.

"Then why not the bath?" Delphine asked.

"Because a bath takes too long." At Delphine's grin, Shay added, "I do need some sleep."

Delphine's grin persisted.

"What?" Shay asked.

"I'm learning so much," Delphine said, "about how adorable you are."

"Oh my God," Shay muttered. "You think it's adorable now but we'll see what you think in six months."

Delphine's grin didn't falter, but softened. "Yes. I cannot wait to see."

In the early hours of the morning, Delphine sensed Shay wake. The blankets atop Delphine shifted minutely and a soft exhalation pierced the quiet of the space. Delphine lay drowsily waiting for the mattress to communicate Shay's departure for a jogging or yoga or meditation. The mattress springs rippled in incremental pulses—and Delphine felt the press of Shay's forehead against her spine and the weight of an arm fall across her waist.
Delphine smiled, laid her hand atop Shay's, and drifted back to sleep.

Chapter End Notes

This update marks almost one year to the day of the fic going up on AO3. I had started the fic several months prior to that decision, but porting the fic to AO3 was the ill-fated moment of my making some degree of commitment to it. I never imagined that commitment would extend to a year's time... or more. But I am glad that serendipity saw fit to have this particular update with its developments fall around the fic's one-year posting anniversary.

A part of me fears never completing this fic, that I will simply not find the ending, but I hope that if that does happen that there's enough here as is that I won't leave readers regretting having taken a chance on a fic with a sketchy premise.

Thank you all for reading. Thank you to everyone who has helped me with details, beta read for me (Jay! ♥️), and generally offered support and kind words and excitement. I wish I could live up to the support you've given me.
Chapter 48

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Delphine blinked into wakefulness, a vista of blue eyes placid in contemplation, and the coalescing wish that she'd woken first to enjoy the opportunity seized by Shay.

Delphine smiled. "Good morning."

The burnt orange of the pillowcase lent heightened vibrancy to Shay's alert gaze. "Good morning."

"How did you sleep?" Delphine asked.

A suggestion of a smile teased at the corners of Shay's mouth. "How did you sleep?"

Delphine raised her arms above her head, twisted, and stretched, pulling at the stiffness in her shoulder. Resettling upon her side, she reached over and brushed back Shay's hair. "Very well. I would like to commend the makers of this very firm mattress."

Shay smirked, eyes encasing a titter, but lips sealed against any quip or alternative explanation.

Delphine asked, "What time is it?"

"Nine? Maybe after?" Shay guessed without seeking confirmation.

"That late?" Delphine smiled. "You could have said the day is over and that there's no reason to leave the bed."

Fondness, exasperation, and familiarity wrested Shay's lips into a smile that enswathed Delphine's heart.

"What about when we get hungry?" Shay countered with the day's first signs of energy.

"I will bring food to you," Delphine assured her.

"You will, huh?" Shay said. "You'll go hunting through my kitchen?"

"Yes. I will sacrifice my comfort and hunt down all the vegetables and seasonings."

Shay turned her face into the pillow to bury all the telltales of laughter. Freeing her mouth, expression softening, she said, "Can I tell you something, though?"

Delphine hunched forward in anticipation. "What?"

"I'm not wild about the idea of staying in bed all day."

Delphine's eyebrows rose. "No?"

"No." Shay's tongue poked between her lips and moistened them. With a blink her gaze alternated between intersecting with Delphine's attention and jumping beyond Delphine's shoulder. "There were times when . . . I had to fight an impulse to stay in bed. If I didn't move, maybe it was for hours, maybe it was all day. So I got really good at getting myself out of bed. It was actually—" A breathless chuckle tugged up the corners of Shay's mouth. "—a pretty good trick to imagine I was
back in basic. But now if I don't get up I can feel—" Shay shrugged. "—guilty." Growing wide-eyed, Shay locked gazes with Delphine and added in a tumble, "I mean, this, right now, is okay. I like this. I like waking up with you." Shay cut herself off with a self-deprecating smile. "Sorry, I don't know why I'm bringing this up."

Delphine stroked Shay's cheek and sought to match Shay's smile. The effort strained. "Earlier I thought you were going to get up and have a jogging or do yoga."

"I thought about it," Shay said softly. "But. You looked more inviting."

Delphine's smile eased and widened.

"You're beautiful," Shay whispered.

The graduation of her smile into a grin threatened to ache and cramp Delphine's muscles.

Shay's eyes crinkled with leashed laughter. "You didn't even blush."

Delphine raised an eyebrow. "Would you blush if I called you beautiful?"

A light smattering of pink flushed to the surface of Shay's cheeks.

Delphine's grin almost hurt. "Tu es belle."

The pink crept into the deeper red spectrum. Shay covered her eyes with a hand and laughed. "I can't ever win with you."

"Is being called beautiful not winning?" Delphine wondered.

"And now you won't let me win at not winning," Shay said, raking back her bangs. She smiled at Delphine. "This isn't fair."

"If you mean that it's not fair that you are beautiful, some would agree," Delphine teased.

"Oh my God," gasped Shay, amid pained giggles, and rolled away, covering her face. Flopping back around, Shay vented her exasperation and asked, "Did you charm all your exes like this?"

"Is it charming?" Delphine asked, interest piqued.

"Well . . ." Shay hesitated. "My original word choice was 'torture,' but that sounded a little harsh, so I went with 'charm.'"

Delphine laughed. "Ah, then that would explain why I did not 'charm' my exes. I can't say that any of them enjoyed blushing."

"I don't enjoy blushing," objected Shay.

"But I enjoy complimenting you," Delphine said, "and I can't help that the truth makes you blush."

Shay's lips parted, expression unreadable by dint of being torn, until Shay's eyes narrowed with skepticism. "You didn't compliment your exes?"

"I complimented them," Delphine said. "But most weren't surprised by what I said. They felt like they deserved it."

Shay blossomed into a grin. "Is that why you didn't blush? You know you're beautiful?"
Delphine smiled. "I was too busy being happy to be embarrassed."

Shay loosed an *ugh*. "You have an answer for everything!"

"I have to keep up somehow if you plan to ask me many questions," Delphine declared.

Shay smacked her own thigh to release a percussive note of disbelief. "See!"

Delphine did nothing to smother her delighted smile. "So your brother visited yesterday?"

"Oh, now you're curious about that?" Shay asked, sounding a little wound up.

"I was curious from the moment you mentioned it," Delphine said, "after I got over the disappointment that I could not see you right away."

"Not so curious that you didn't ask about it first thing," Shay pointed out.

"Last night I had some preoccupations," Delphine said, adopting an air of innocence.

"That's . . . a way of putting it," Shay said, eyes bright.

Delphine hoped her smile didn't look too self-satisfied. "Which of your brothers visited? Chris or Paul?"

Shay readjusted and slipped a hand beneath the pillow, tugging it snug and close beneath her head. "Paul. He was in the city only for a day."

"Is that usual for him?" Delphine asked.

"Honestly?" Shay's brow dipped in thought. "I don't know. I mean, he could be in Toronto every other week but never mention it—that's probably usual for Paul, going somewhere but not telling anyone. His movements are a mystery."

"Does he travel often?"

"He can," Shay said. "For business and pleasure. He does a lot of consulting work and selling cyber security software—I think? I haven't really asked him about what he does and Paul doesn't talk about it much. I think he's doing really well—that's the impression I've always gotten—but he's . . . quiet about it? Wait." Shay rolled over to retrieve her phone and fiddled with the screen. When she turned the display toward Delphine, Delphine beheld a bearded man with eyes a shade similar to Shay's and an air of contained self-possession. Handsome.

"I can see the family resemblance," Delphine said. "Did you have much to talk about?"

Shay smiled in amusement. "Paul isn't a big talker in general. Especially about himself. He doesn't share much—at least, with me. It's possible he tells Chris more than he tells me—which I could see. I'm always going to be his little sister and maybe he doesn't want to worry me."

Delphine hesitated. "Are there things about his life that are worrying?"

Shay twitched a shoulder. "If there are, I don't know about them."

"Does he try to learn the things that are worrying about your life? Is that how it works to have a big brother?"
Shay chuckled. "No. Not with Paul. Getting into other people's business is my thing. And Chris's. Chris is willing to ask a million questions if he thinks there's something to know—but on the flipside, it never feels like Chris has something to hide."

"You and Paul have things to hide?" Delphine asked.

Shay's gaze withdrew in consideration. "I don't know. It can feel like Paul is hiding stuff because he doesn't volunteer information. But not like he's keeping dark secrets. Just... with him, I know there are things I don't know. As for me..." Shay shrugged. "Maybe. A thing or two. Until I'm ready to bring it up." She scanned Delphine's face. "Wait. Are you trying to find out if I talked to Paul about you?"

Delphine smiled. "Did you?"

"Not... directly. He kinda guessed something might be going on, but we didn't get into it."

"Do you talk about your relationships with your brothers?" Delphine asked.

Shay shook her head. "Not really. Chris will ask if I'm trying to meet people or if I'm seeing anyone, and if I say yes, then he'll chip away with follow-up questions. But I think he does it mostly to make sure that I'm okay and that I'm not in a bad situation or anything like that." Shay smiled. "He likes to gossip, too, but it's probably mostly protectiveness."

"Gossip?"

"You know... get the juicy details. Like—do your mom and dad ask questions about—" A stutter disrupted the smooth rhythms of Shay's delivery. "—the people you date?"

Delphine smiled with a shred of defeat. "It's easier for us if we don't discuss it. My mother used to ask about my love life, especially when I was still in school, and always wanted to meet the men I mentioned. For the most part, she approved. But that meant that she was always... a little disappointed whenever she learned a relationship ended."

"Right," Shay breathed with a little nod.

"Though I don't know if she was ever really sad," reflected Delphine. "She had so many friends and contacts with sons and I think she liked to picture me ending up with one of them eventually, not the men I met in classes or clubs. I told you that she organizes many events? Sometimes she convinced me to attend so that she could introduce me to the available unmarried men." Delphine shook her head. "She never gave that as the reason she wanted me to go, of course."

"Did you date any of the men she introduced you to?" Shay asked.

Delphine chuckled. "I went on a date with one. He was nice and it was pleasant, but... only pleasant? We didn't have a second date."

Shay smiled to herself in some private amusement. Delphine liked the smile. She liked Shay smiling.

"Can I be nosy," asked Delphine, "since your brother was not?"

Shay's smile faded into a look inquisitive, somewhat wary, but ultimately inviting.

"Who was the first woman you kissed?" Delphine asked.

Shay responded with a subtle, minute jerk of her head that jogged the glint in Shay's eyes through
Delphine hazarded a smile. "Is that an odd question?"

Shay shook her head, expelling her expression. "No. It's not odd. It's kind of . . . typical, actually."

Delphine raised an eyebrow. "Is that disappointing? Should I avoid asking typical questions?"

Shay smiled, tight-lipped, as if exasperation might escape her mouth otherwise. "No. The question is fine and it's fine that you asked it."

"Yes?" Delphine said, letting her puzzlement ring. "Your reaction was very interesting for a question you consider 'typical.'"

Shay appeared to weigh Delphine's assessment. When her rumination stretched long, Delphine warned lightly, "If you tell me it was nothing, I probably won't believe you."

Shay's lips twitched with an infusion of mirth but settled into a discomfited slant. "I thought—"
Shay's lower lip jutted in vexation. "For a second I imagined you getting that question. From—"
Shay's gaze cut away, returned. "—someone else. And the answer being—" Shay's mouth dipped toward a frown. "Would it be me?"

Delphine smiled and lay her fingertips upon Shay's jaw, contemplating Shay's lips. "That may be hard to say. I have kissed many people. It is a customary form of greeting in France."

Shay smiled, eyes chiding, mouth taut. "Okay. Then I guess I don't know how you'd answer."

Delphine dabbed at the corner of Shay's mouth, where the muscles labored. "I can see it. It'll be a function, perhaps. Black tie. Where investors are brought in to mingle with white coats and there are too few hors d'oeuvres and too much alcohol. The combination is important—it makes conversation easier and wallets looser. That's how discussion goes from research to getting too familiar. I will have to tell the man who wants to write a check that I am unavailable. He thinks it's a lie. I assure him my girlfriend is very beautiful. And it's true. I've had too much champagne and I shouldn't have said it, but it's true."

Shay shook her head, mouth relaxing.

Delphine continued. "He looks more interested and says, 'Girlfriend? Have you had many girlfriends? When did you realize you liked girls? Who was the first girl you kissed?' It'll be terrible. I'll have to pretend you're calling me in order to escape." Delphine skimmed Shay's eyes. "Is that what you were thinking?"

"No," Shay said, eyes alight with good-natured admonishment. "But that's what I'm imagining now."

Delphine cupped Shay's cheek. "He wouldn't deserve to know about you, anyway."

"He might not believe you, if I'm not at the party," Shay remarked.

Delphine smiled. "Would you like to be at the function? To be honest, it's not an experience I want to subject you to. They have the appearance of glamor but it doesn't extend beyond the decorations. They're often dull. And pandering." Delphine made a face. "It's torture, not charming."

"But you said black tie. I'd get to see you all glammed up."

"You would," Delphine said. "However, I feel like we could find a better excuse to dress up, if that's
what you want. One where I wouldn't have to . . . work. So that I could enjoy the sight of you, as well."

Shay chuckled and rolled her eyes. 

"What?" demanded Delphine.

"I never know to what extent I should take you seriously," Shay said, airily.

"Very seriously," scolded Delphine. "I am being serious. What makes you think I'm not?"

Shay adjusted the lay of her head upon the pillow and simply considered Delphine, the corners of her mouth curled up.

"What part makes you skeptical?" Delphine asked, narrowing Shay's response options.

Shay peered over Delphine, in the direction of the window, eyes squinting in concentration. "We've known each other for a while and in all that time . . ."

Delphine watched Shay expectantly.

"I don't know," Shay said in a measured pace, "if I've ever seen you check someone out. Not men. Not women. Not . . . me."

Delphine's eyebrows leapt up. "Did you check me out?"

"I . . . tried not to," Shay said carefully. "So as not to be that guy in your story. But you're kind of hard not to notice. I don't know if you're aware of it, but people check you out all the time."

"You notice this?" Delphine asked.

"Yes," Shay said, almost exasperated. "I've sat at the bar with you as men bought you drinks. You barely gave any of them a once over."

"So you don't believe me when I say that I want to enjoy the sight of you?"

"I guess it doesn't seem like something that would . . . interest you. What I wear or what I look like."

"Okay, first," Delphine said, "you are aware that you are beautiful, according to the same criteria that you apply to me? I wasn't calling you beautiful to tease you—it's true. How many men tried to buy you drinks when we went out? And they were right in their assessment. I always thought that. What I didn't understand was why you weren't approached by more women on—what was that dating thing?"

"Sapphire?"

"Yes. I don't know how many women contacted you, but you mentioned only one. But I've seen the photographs you posted. They are good pictures."

Shay picked at the threads extending from the seam of the pillowcase.

"Second," Delphine continued, holding up two fingers, "I have been told I can be very . . . um." She frowned. "Focused. So focused that I don't notice other things. Outside things. So before it did not occur to me to be interested in the idea of you dressing up, but now . . . I am very interested. You have my attention."
"Who told you that you're like that?" Shay asked.


Shay nodded, thoughtful.

"It's been said to me in different contexts," Delphine admitted. "Sometimes using different phrases."

"You work hard," Shay said. "Anyone can see that."

"I would like to think I worked hard to get here, talking with you like this," Delphine teased.

Shay's mouth flexed into a smile. "Yeah. That's an understatement." Shay scratched at the sheet between them. "But, you know, having your attention is . . . it's intense."

Delphine surveyed Shay's downcast gaze. "Is it too much?"

Shay found Delphine's eyes through her lashes. "More like . . . unexpected."

Delphine searched Shay's eyes. "So you don't know if I am being serious."

"Yeah," Shay said softly.

"Even though I'm lying in your bed," deadpanned Delphine, "after last night."

Shay nodded, unaffected. "Yeah."

"Seriously?" cracked Delphine.

"Sex . . ." Shay shrugged. "Sex can be just sex—I don't know—stop laughing—it's true."

Delphine didn't stop laughing and, helplessly infected, Shay chuckled along a little, albeit with a sense of resignation.

"Shay . . ." Delphine sighed into a smile when she caught her breath. "How can you be surprised that I am 'intense' when you are like this?"

Shay turned her face into her forearm to hide. "I don't know. Don't ask me. You're making it hard to think."

Delphine reached out and rubbed Shay's hip through the sheets. "Maybe the issue is that you are thinking too much."

Shay peeked at Delphine with her uncovered eye. "The first woman I kissed was in the military." Shay nibbled at her lower lip. "Up until then, I . . . didn't have the understanding or an opportunity to kiss another woman. Not that the military at the time was a place of opportunity, but . . . she knew what she wanted. And she knew what I wanted. Better than I knew."

Delphine touched Shay's chin, coaxing Shay out from behind the cover of her arm. "Wanting you is something she and I share, then. And no wonder."

Shay attempted a smile. Delphine leaned over and kissed it into place.

"I'm sorry that you didn't have a jogging or do yoga this morning," whispered Delphine.

"We'll call it a cheat day," murmured Shay, "due to extenuating circumstances."
Delphine sucked at her lips. "Maybe you could substitute some other activity."

Shay smirked. "You have something in mind?"

Delphine returned to the contemplation of Shay's lips. "I have an idea or two."

* * *

The screen of Delphine's cell phone illuminated briefly and then faded into blank hibernation atop the stool by the bed. Shay, top sheet in hand to pull it into place, eyed it with a frown. That was the fourth, no, maybe fifth spurt of electronic life. That Shay had noticed. It was probably a notification, possibly for a text message, from the lack of an accept call prompt and the brevity of the screen activity.

Shay licked her lips. "Delphine?"

"Yes?" Delphine called from the kitchen.

Shay turned. "You're either really popular or someone's trying hard to reach you."

"Is that so?" Delphine queried, sounding unconcerned.

"I think I've seen your phone go off like four or five times. Are you expecting any calls?"

"No," Delphine said. She made no move to abandon her watch of the warming kettle.

"Are you . . . not concerned?" Shay wondered.

"It's Saturday," remarked Delphine.

Shay raised an eyebrow. "Actually, it's Sunday."

Delphine froze, lips parting silently as disbelief briefly swept away her expression. Taking a deep breath and shaking her head, she said, "Then . . . all the more reason I am entitled to a little time to myself."

"It could be an emergency," Shay pointed out. "Or your mom."

"Or my mother calling to inform me of an emergency?" Delphine proposed.

"Yes," Shay agreed, smiling despite the gruesome scenario of the hypothetical.

"It could be any of those things," Delphine agreed, "or none of those things. Until I check, it is not yet anything."

"Is that how it works?" Shay asked drily.

The kettle let out a thin whistle that built into a shriek. Delphine snatched it up and killed the range.

"In quantum physics, theoretically, yes."

"Quantum physics?" Shay asked.

"In quantum physics, observing a phenomenon defines its state." Delphine poured boiling water over coffee grinds in the French press and a tea bag dangling inside a mug. "Do you know Schrodinger's cat? The cat exists in a state of uncertainty, both alive and dead, until you open the box and confirm the status. The messages I am receiving are both emergencies and not emergencies until I read them."
"Shouldn't you assume they're emergencies—or at least urgent—and check to make sure they aren't?" Shay asked.

"I assume I will have this opportunity to enjoy a cup of coffee with you while you have a cup of tea," Delphine said as she depressed the plunger. 

Shay turned back to making the bed. "It could be Cosima."

The plunger stuck in the French press. Delphine jostled it into resuming descent.

"She could be sick and trying to reach you," Shay said.

"It's likely Cosima," Delphine said, voice low. "It's unlikely she's sick. Come over?"

Shay tugged the comforter into place, tossed pillows toward the head of the bed, swiped Delphine's phone off the stool, and trekked to the table. Shay set down the phone and Delphine placed the mug of tea beside it, keeping the one of coffee to herself.

Delphine took a seat and ignored the phone. "Thank you for the coffee."

"I just picked up a bag while I was buying groceries," Shay said. She didn't sit but detoured into the kitchen to grab the box of truffles. She slid them onto the table as she sat down.

"But you don't usually buy coffee, do you?" Delphine asked as she eyed the box. She shifted in her chair so that her knee pressed against Shay's leg. "You bought it for me."

Shay smiled and reached for her mug. "It's not the best or the freshest."

"You mean I don't merit the best or the freshest?" Delphine asked.

Shay grinned. "Exactly. Also, I have no idea what the best or the freshest would be."

Delphine reached over and squeezed Shay's wrist. "Thank you."

"You're welcome." Shay sipped the tea and decided the infusion needed more time to steep.

"Are you going to have chocolate for breakfast?" Delphine wondered. Her fingers still lay upon Shay's wrist, conducting minute strokes that faintly tickled.

"Maybe one," Shay said. "I've been nibbling at them over the week. I was worried maybe they'd go bad or something."

Delphine smiled. "I wasn't warned that they would go bad within a week, but perhaps they lose freshness."

"Stale chocolate?" Shay wondered. She lifted off the lid.

"Maybe?" Delphine said.

Shay smiled. "Do you want one?"

Delphine shook her head. "No, thank you."

Shay chose a truffle at random and nibbled at the end. "If you think Cosima is trying to reach you, why are you reluctant to answer your phone?"
"Because if it is Cosima, it's likely related to work, and if it's related to work then it may need my attention, and if it needs my attention then I will not be able to stay," Delphine rattled off and ended with a sharp inhalation. "And I would like to stay because I have not seen you for most of the week."

"It doesn't matter that it's Sunday?" Shay asked.

Delphine shook her head. "Not anymore. Not for the foreseeable future."

Shay nodded.

Delphine's fingers stilled. "You aren't disappointed? I am."

"But you also know that you need to work," Shay said with a little smile. "I know what the stakes are, Delphine. I know you're fighting against the clock." She bit off a more sizeable chunk of the truffle and let the chocolate melt on her tongue. "How is Cosima?"

"Okay," Delphine answered, subdued, "all things considered." She licked her lips. "It may be like this from now on, a struggle to find time to see one another."

Shay smiled, weary but in sympathy. "That's fine. That's normal. I think." She shook her head and reached for her tea, not picking it up but pressing her fingertips to the warmth of the ceramic. "In the military people were separated from their families and significant others for months at a time. The only things holding them together were letters, phone calls, and care packages. But I'm here. You're here. We'll figure it out."

Delphine's lips parted but nothing emerged at once. Delphine glanced into her coffee mug and said, "I've been thinking about the planetarium. That we should go back."

"That would be nice," Shay agreed. "We could go real stargazing some time."

"Are there places here where you can do that?" Delphine asked.

Shay tried her tea again. A bitterness of tannins indicated she'd waited too long. She stood up to extract the tea bag and throw it away. "It's not something we could do spur of the moment. I haven't looked into any options since I moved, but we'd probably have to drive at least two hours out. But I think it'd be worth it. How do you feel about camping?"

"I'm not sure," Delphine said.

Shay smiled, sliding back into the seat. Delphine reestablished contact with her knee, traced Shay's inner forearm from elbow to wrist. "Maybe we'll find out." Shay tapped upon the table by the phone. "Do you want to check your messages?"

Delphine shook her head, engaged in a study of Shay's arm. "No. I want to stay here with you."

"I know," Shay said, "but if I were sending you messages, I'd want you to read them. How about I go shower and you can find out what's happening."

Delphine sighed, head bowing in surrender to a task she didn't want to approach. In a redirection of disappointment, Delphine muttered, "You're always showering."

"Cleanliness is godliness," Shay said.

Delphine lifted her head. "How?"

Shay stalled in her preparations to stand up. "What do you mean how?"
"Are the gods corporeal?" Delphine asked. "Do they have physical forms like bodies that get dirty?"

Shay cocked her head. "Why does that matter?"

"Well, if they are purely spiritual and exist in a realm that cannot be touched or seen, how can they be considered clean or dirty?"

"Maybe they're clean as a consequence of their inability to get dirty," Shay tried.

"Can't you reverse that logic and say that they're dirty because they cannot be cleaned?" A sparkle in Delphine's eyes signalled that this was an opening volley in an engagement that she would happily carry on.

"I'm going to get clean," Shay declared. She was learning. She stood up and dropped a kiss upon the crown of Delphine's head. "I won't take long."

Delphine tilted her head back, eyes on Shay's lips, and lifted her chin in request. Smiling, Shay leaned over and kissed her. Delphine tasted of coffee. Shay probably tasted like chocolate. Again. The thought spurred Shay to giggles, interrupting the contact of their mouths. But Delphine held Shay in place until Shay pulled away, shaking her head in light chastisement.

"You could not shower," Delphine said, voice low, "and we could stay in bed all day. Or some more, at least."

Shay smoothed back Delphine's hair, luxuriating in the mane that spread out between her fingers, and pressed a lingering kiss to Delphine's forehead. Straightening up, she stroked Delphine's cheek. "I can't endorse playing hooky when lives are on the line."

Delphine closed her eyes, the corners of her mouth threatening to be dragged down. "You're right."

It didn't feel good to be right. Not in this case. But one of them had to be.

*

Delphine was right and she resented it.

From Cosima [10:08]: Are you going to head into the lab today?  
From Cosima [10:30]: Let me know if you're going in today.  
From Cosima [10:39]: Just spoke to Scott. He said Professor Duncan elected to stay at the lab last night and that he should still be there.  
From Cosima [10:39]: Wasn't really encouraged by the "should."  
From Cosima [10:45]: Getting a ride into the lab from Scott. Gotta ask Manny and the others about the policy on ubers. For some reason I don't think they'd be happy if I showed up at the gate in some random person's car.  
From Cosima [10:45]: It would be funny though.

No demand lay couched in Cosima's messages, but Delphine sensed the expectation lurking behind the inquiries. Worse, Delphine understood the rationale. Developing a cure was the most important task facing Delphine, the reason she'd pitched aid in Cosima's direction, but to her surprise it did not feel, in the moment, like what she wanted to do.

Delphine gazed up into Shay's very high ceiling and sighed.

With Shay in the shower, Delphine dressed and retrieved the garment bag from her car. Laying it out on the bed, she contemplated the business formal ensemble, wishing she'd prepared an additional
casual option, and opted to swap only the blouse in place of the one she'd worn the day before.

Cosima wasn't that observant, was she? Delphine would find out.

Shay emerged from the bathroom swaddled in a robe so fluffy it rendered her a plush toy in demand of a cuddle. Delphine grinned, but remembered the announcement she had to make.

"It was Cosima. I'm going to go into the lab."

Shay nodded. A small smile, a little knowing, a little resigned, commandeered her mouth. "Do you want to have breakfast—or brunch, I guess—before you go in?"

Delphine smiled. "Yes. It is Sunday."

As Shay urged Delphine into the bathroom, dodging and giggling as Delphine plucked at the belt of the robe, Delphine knew with sudden certainty that this was what she wanted to do today. That she would be content to just . . . be. In this space. With this person. For this time. A part of her suspected she should feel sorry about it, that this abundance of time was what had been denied those afflicted like Cosima. Another part worried that she couldn't summon the conviction to feel bad—and that that was another thing to feel bad about. But today Delphine felt as she did the day she stepped aboard her flight to Canada, that the world was opening up, that the opportunities were multiplying, that everyday afterwards would bring new wonders and new feats and yet higher achievements within reach.

When had Delphine stopped feeling like that?

How could she let it go now that she'd discovered it again?

* 

All breakfast Delphine smiled at Shay from across the table. That beaming visage had become part and parcel of restaurant decor over their last few outings, as much a fixture of a dining environment as table lights, flowers, cutlery, and salt and pepper shakers. The difference today was that Shay could feel herself smiling back—and trying to repress how goofy she must have looked.

The irrepressible response entered Shay's awareness around the second time she caught herself smiling, the heady lightness amassing weight the more she examined it until Shay was minding the swelling buoyancy to a point of missing questions and cues. But acknowledged, Shay couldn't ignore the expanding sensation that, like any fragile inflatable wonder, sparked elation and anxiety. About the potential immensity. About the unknown limit. Whether it might soar.

If it might burst.

It filled Shay's mind, pushing out against the contours of her skull and left no room for other thoughts. Shay was dimly aware of leaving the restaurant, shuffling past patrons coming in, and that the form beside her matched her stride for stride. Something brushed against her fingers and the jolt almost made Shay jump.

Delphine had reached for her hand.

Delphine said nothing, but slowed as Shay's steps did, gaze sweeping intently across Shay's face. Shay could only guess what her expression looked like. She realized she couldn't remember the last words they'd exchanged.

Shay dredged up a feeble smile and took Delphine's hand.
At Delphine's car they kissed goodbye. Delphine's hands lingered on Shay's waist and her eyes projected a laser intensity of focus.

Shay gathered her scattered composure and, pinching at the cuff of Delphine's coat, asked, "Don't want to go to the lab?"

Delphine focused on a point upon Shay's shoulder, then tugged Shay's scarf snugger around her neck. "Do you have plans today?"

Shay shook her head. "Laundry, probably. Groceries, maybe. Cleaning . . . I should clean."

Delphine's lips twitched but reversed direction in a capitulation to gravity. "I want to ask if I can come over later but I realized I might be kept working late."

Shay smiled. "That's why humans invented cell phones, so we can check if other people are available without going out of the way. No more trouble of having to leave a calling card."

Delphine was quiet, offering no correction on Shay's narrow interpretation of the accomplishment of the cellular phone.

"You can call me," Shay said softly.

Delphine lifted her gaze and searched Shay's eyes. Hesitation dipped her brow for a second. "What if you left your door open—"

"—or I gave you the key to my place—"

Shay thumped her forehead into Delphine's shoulder as giggles wracked her.

"—and then it wouldn't be a matter of availability." Delphine smoothed Shay's hair. "I'm starting to see why the U-hauling is appealing."

Shay pulled back with a sigh to catch her breath. She leaned up and kissed Delphine's cheek. "You're too cute."

Delphine scanned Shay's face. "You don't think I'm serious."

"Are you?" challenged Shay.

A small smile graced Delphine's lips. "I'm serious about wanting to come over."

"Call me," Shay said. "Or text me."

"I will," Delphine said, resignation depressing the line of her shoulders. Yet draped in the struggling winter noon sunlight, cheeks pinkening from the bite of the wind, not even defeat could diminish Delphine's beauty.

She was so beautiful.

Shay touched Delphine's cheek and, for a second, let loose the restraints on that bubbling, ballooning feeling. Delphine leaned into Shay's hand and smiled.

Shortly thereafter Shay watched Delphine drive away.
Shay dithered in the parking lot for a bit, hands shoved into the pockets of her coat and breaths curling away in misty bursts, and then went to Eliot's Bookshop. Her thoughts sought not its selection, where BMV would have better served up a bounty of popular reads, but its hardwood floors, its earthy tones, the three floors of twists and turns of bookshelves in which Shay could tuck herself away—boxed in by the thin sentinels of variegated spines and the scent of aged paper.

Old friends. Old companions.

Albeit of a stock sold to be resold to the discerning stranger. A used bookstore was a particular showroom, where books were haunted by the ghosts of possession, the traces of ownership claimed and rescinded. Yellowing pages. Cracked spines. Bent corners. Margin notes. A name scribbled inside the cover. Shay understood these signs. She came into these spaces as rescuer and fair weather friend—to pluck volumes out of languishing obscurity, only to return and resign a title back to the cycle. In the military, books served in the post of Shay's bunk and then were redeployed to relieve fellow minds bored and taxed for stimulation. When she got out, the bag on her back accommodated clothing, a few spare shoes, a bathroom kit, and a book or two that passed through her hands, sometimes purchases, sometimes gifts sending her on her way. Nowadays the books went back to the stores from which Shay bought them. Not for lack of space, yet to prevent an impression of clutter. To maintain a lightness of load.

Not like her mother's books. Her mother's books were stalwart staples and presences, most installed in their places before a thought of Shay existed, kept to be thumbed through again and again across the years. The especially esteemed and cherished occupied designated spots. Shay would look for them, like the faces of acquaintances in a crowd, checking to see if they were there or out in circulation.

Shay loved her mother's select library.

Shay resented that oft revisited corner of literature.

The dust jackets and cover art that would lastingly define a work in Shay's mind and shape unsampled contents. The deliberation with which her mother chose material to assign for Shay's edification. The silence imposed throughout the rooms through the occupation of reading when her mother returned from a long shift. The increasingly rare late nights her mother would read aloud to Shay and her brothers curled against her mother's form on the couch. The substitutes the books were intended to serve as gateways and explications for the talks that wouldn't be had and the topics that couldn't be raised. The illicit thrill of sneaking out books deemed too mature for her. Running her finger along the spines in a furtive catalog of the titles, attempting to determine what her mother might be reading at a given time, as if an absence on the shelf might point to the emotion occupying her mother's heart.

Her mother's library.

Shay carried it with her in more ways than words imprinted verbatim.

Sometimes Shay sought out the impressions and structures of its memory. Sometimes the memories sought her out.

Shay found a solitary corner on the second floor and lowered herself to the floor cross-legged, as she would have squeezed up near her mother's bookshelves as a child. She pressed her fingertips upon the closest spines, scanned the titles, and paused when she realized Pablo Neruda lay beneath her touch. She swallowed.

Dropping her hand, Shay scanned the aisle and ensured she was alone. No one stood in sight. Still,
Shay discreetly pulled out her phone, scrolled through the contacts, and punched the call thumbnail.

"Hello?" came an uncertain voice midway through the third ring. "Shay?"

"Hey, Chris," Shay said, keeping her voice low.

"Hey!" Chris echoed with amplified enthusiasm. "What's up?" Chris paused, then returned more cautious. "You okay?"

Shay bowed her head to hide a smile her brother couldn't see. "I'm fine. How are you? I'm not disturbing you, am I?"

"No. No, no, no, you're fine. I was grading papers but I could use a break."

"Oh, I'm sorry. I can let you go."

"No, no. I want to talk to you. We haven't talked in a while. It's—hold up." Silence for a time, then Chris resounded in her ear. "Nadia says hi."

Shay smiled. "Tell her hi back for me."

"She says hi," Chris called out. Then, resuming their conversation without concern for any possible reply from Nadia, he said, "I assume she heard me."

"How's she doing?"

"Nadia? She's great." In a slightly louder volume, he added, "Beautiful and lovely as ever. One and only light of my life." Noise in the background added aural texture. Chris chuckled. "She's great. But how are you? Is everything okay? Why are you speaking so low?"

"Oh, sorry, I'm in a public place," explained Shay and proceeded to sidestep the second direct inquiry into her wellbeing. "Guess who I saw yesterday?"

Chris's confusion manifested almost as a physical sound before Shay heard it in his reply. "I—don't know? Natalie Portman? Does the Toronto Film Festival take place at this time of the year?"

Shay laughed and rushed to stifle the outburst, covering her mouth. "No, it doesn't. It happens, like, at the end of summer. And I've never gone. And why Natalie Portman? Just because you like her?"

"Um, yes? She's a great actress and you know that I like her. It's not like you would be excited to tell me if you saw Ellen Page."

"Why wouldn't I tell you if I saw Ellen Page?" Shay countered, indignation mixing with defensiveness and confusion. "That would be a story I would tell you. Definitely."

"Yeah, but you said 'guess who I saw' like I would be interested in the answer."

"You don't like Ellen Page?" Shay asked.

"I've enjoyed some of her work, yeah, but my interest in her wouldn't be the same as your interest in her," Chris reasoned.

"Meaning?"

"Meaning I would happily welcome Ellen Page into the family as my sister-in-law."
Shay snickered. "Yeah. I see."

"You don't think she's cute?" Chris asked.

"She's beautiful," Shay said promptly. "She's a movie star—how could she not be?"

"And you'd be taller than her."

Shay guffawed. "Thanks."

"It's true. It's really well known that she's short."

"I'm sure she loves being short and having everyone know it." Shay drawled.

"Well, if you say so, since you'd know," Chris said.

"Shut up," Shay said around a repressed laugh. "I'm not even short! I'm average height."

"Yes, that's why all your clothes are size ultra small," Chris said.

"Is this about that one time you tried to buy me a shirt and it was the wrong size?"

"No," Chris said, sharp and abrupt, but with a smile projecting through his voice, "but it was a great shirt. I picked it all by myself."

"I'm sorry. I felt bad, too," Shay said, checking the volume of her voice in a late realization that she'd been raising it. "It's not like you could go back to Disney World and exchange it."

"At least the socks fit," Chris lamented with a dramatic sigh. "So who did you see?"

Shay swiped at the corners of her mouth. "Paul."

"Paul? Our brother Paul?" Chris said.

"That was basically my reaction," Shay said.

"He was in Toronto? Man, Paul's a friggin' ninja."

"I don't think that's quite the right analogy . . ." 

"How is that not the right analogy? He's never where you think is," Chris declared. Curiosity wriggled into his voice. "How's he doing?"

"He looked good. He wasn't here long. We had dinner and then he had to catch his flight."

"Flight to where?"

"I . . . didn't ask him," admitted Shay. "I assumed back to New York."

"You assumed!" exclaimed Chris with stricken melodrama that Shay could only hope he incorporated into his lectures and lessons. "He could have been going anywhere. This is how he gets away with being a ninja."

"Okay, but even if I'd asked, Paul could have lied if he didn't want me to know where he was going."

"That's possible," Chris conceded. "But I think you'd have a pretty good chance of getting the truth
from him. I mean, how do I know that you didn't ask where he was going or that he didn't mention it? Maybe he's heading over here right now. Maybe that's what he told you and then he swore you to silence! Maybe you're calling to try to give me a heads up!"

Shay shook her head, grinning. "That's definitely not what happened."

"Which is what you would say if you were trying not to break your word," Chris reasoned. "That's what I would do."

"I wouldn't," deadpanned Shay.

"Ah, well," Chris said complacently, not derailed. "If Paul wants to show up, he's always welcome. As are you, of course."

Shay nodded. "I know, I know."

"Speaking of you, how are you doing?"

A deep breath braced Shay against a flutter of nerves. Chris would not be thrice denied—and Shay wouldn't do that to him. Not when she had called him.

Shay bowed her head. "I'm good."

Chris paused. "I'm going to ask you a question and I need you to answer me honestly, okay?" No humor or brightness laced his tone. "Are you good, for real?"

"Yeah," Shay said, shoving back her hair. "I'm good. Work is good. The weather's not too cold here. A friend visited recently. And I'm, uh . . ." Shay weighed her words. "I think I'm seeing somebody."

Chris didn't miss a puzzled beat. "You think you're seeing somebody? How does that happen? Are you meeting up and going out but not calling it dates?"

"No," Shay said quickly. "No. We—we've been on dates. We're dating. We have been for, like, a week." Said aloud, that sounded ridiculous. "But we've known each other for months. We were friends." Shay hesitated. "I thought she was straight."

"Ooooh," intoned Chris in understanding. "Is that the problem?"

"I thought it would be," admitted Shay. "But she doesn't consider it an issue. At all."

"That sounds like a good thing," Chris said, measured delivery edging toward rising into an interrogative at the end. "But . . . do you consider it a problem?"

Shay leaned into her phone. She closed her eyes, combed her free hand through her hair, and clutched a handful at the base of skull. She grimaced against the strain, then relaxed her grip. "Okay, so when we started hanging out—as friends—I liked her, but I knew—well, I thought—she was straight, because she'd only dated men and we'd talked about it, so I didn't think about her in—romantic terms. So I had no idea she might see me that way, ever. And then she—she made a move."

Chris responded without pause. "Does she have a name?"

Shay exhaled sharply into a smile, shoulders slumping out of their tense line. "Her name's Delphine."

"That's a nice name."

"Yeah," agreed Shay.
"What does she do?"

"She's a doctor. And a research scientist."

There was a pause that Shay interpreted as her brother being momentarily taken aback. "How did you meet? Do you work together?"

A halfhearted chuckle bubbled up. "No. She was, um—she was one of my clients."

Chris fell silent again.

"There was nothing inappropriate," Shay supplied, a tad quickly. "Like I said, we were just friends. When she stopped coming to see me, we started hanging out."

"How did that happen?"

"After her last session, I—I told her that if she ever wanted to get coffee or something, that I . . . would be available."

Quiet buzzed in Shay's ear. "Is this something you do a lot?"

Shay's shoulders crumpled. "No."

"So . . . you were interested in her?"

Shay took a breath and held it. Blowing it out, she said, "She's a very attractive woman."

"Okay. So you were trying to seduce her?"

Shay covered her eyes. "No. There was just—something about her."

"Something what?"

Shay leaned into the edge of her hand, straightening it upon her brow like a visor. She spoke quietly. "Something lonely."

She'd never told Delphine that. She had no idea if Delphine had been lonely in truth or if she'd seen what she'd wanted to see in order to justify her own actions, a reckless invitation extended to a beautiful woman.

"Did she get in touch with you?"

"Yeah."

"Okay," Chris said, brightly. "Then maybe she was lonely."

Shay pressed her fingers to her lips. "She moved from Paris to work in Toronto."


By which Chris meant the events and their order of occurrence appeared to fall within the parameters of acceptable. Shay grinned ruefully to herself. "Is this what teaching high school does to you?"

"I'm just looking out for you," Chris said, "but yes."

Shay smiled. "Don't worry. No need for a lecture. I keep it professional."
"Good. Especially since your work setting is more . . . intimate than mine."

Shay rolled her eyes and modulated her tone into a corresponding flatness. "I know."

"Okay, okay. You know what you're doing. I got it. Let's get back on topic." As if they were in the classroom and gotten sidetracked by a tangent. "So we've established that Delphine got in touch with you first and that she made a move on you first."

Hearing Chris collate the events made Shay pause. "Yes."

"I'm still not clear why you only 'think' you're seeing each other."

Shay mulled on the past week. The dinners. The messages. The calls. Delphine's expressions. The light in her eyes. The softness in her smiles. The eagerness to establish contact. The enthusiasm of her touch.

The night before. That morning.

Shay passed her tongue over her lips. "Well, after she—made her move, she's been . . . really into it."

"Really into . . . you?" Chris asked, the uplift at the end born skyward on a gale of uncertainty. "Yeah."

"Isn't that what's supposed to happen?"

"No—yes, but I mean—she's been really into it. Like." Shay stared hard into a whorl in the hardwood. "I'm not sure sometimes if—maybe—she's overcompensating. Like maybe she's trying to convince me, but also, maybe, herself?"

The way Delphine sowed declarations and reminders that she wanted to see Shay. The way she tossed out quips and audacity as if to uncover and exceed boundaries. The way she had shown up with an ambush plan. The way she'd asked if Shay wanted to have sex with her. The way she'd beheld Shay in the moment nothing stood between them. With wonder. With tentativeness.

"Okay, but . . . if you're the first woman she's been with . . . maybe she has to build up her confidence."

"Yeah," Shay breathed. "I know. But I'm not pushing her."

"You're letting her call all the shots."

"Yeah."

"Okay, so . . . are you into what's happening? Are you into her?"

Shay rubbed at her forehead. What she thought of saying was I remember the last time I felt like this and I remember what happened and I remember how it ended and I remember what it felt like afterwards. Her mouth opened and out tumbled, "Did you ever feel like Nadia was too good for you?"

Delayed realization dragged Shay down into icy depths of mortification.

But Chris laughed. "Isn't it obvious? She is too good for me. Absolutely." His voice lowered. "You know, her greatest flaw is probably that she thinks she's not too good for me."
Shay covered her eyes. "I didn't mean that. I'm sorry. You're awesome. And amazing. And—"

"Shay," her brother said gently, "I understood what you meant."

Shay propped her elbow on a knee and dumped her head into her hand. "No. I'm sorry. I don't know what I meant. When you and Nadia met, you were on the same track."

"Yeah."

"You weren't—you were both—" Shay took a breath. "You were at similar points in your lives."

"Yeah," Chris agreed gamely. "Nadia was determined to conquer law school. And I was deciding not to go."

Shay shook her head. "Yeah, but that was like . . . the beginning. Not the finish line. You went through a process—together. You made those decisions—about the people you were going to be—together."

"Does it worry you that Delphine is a doctor?" Chris asked.

Shay leaned back against the shelves. "No. I mean, yes, but because—we're so different. I feel like she and I are at points where—" Shay groped for the framing. "—we've gone through our separate journeys and where we are is who we are." Shay raised her eyes to the charmless ceiling. "She's so driven, Chris. That's why she's a doctor—MD, PhD—even though she's only a few years older than I am. She knows what she wants and she goes after it. She never . . ." Shay peered into the gaping spaces between rail posts. "She didn't take detours."

"Isn't that reassuring in a way?" Chris asked. "If she doesn't take detours, then you're not a detour?"

Shay turned her head and poked at a book spine. "The detours she didn't take were romantic relationships."

Chris took a second to digest Shay's assertion. "Is she giving off any signs that this is a fling?"

"No," assessed Shay haltingly, "not that I can tell. But I don't have a lot of basis for comparison. The whole situation is really new? So everything looks shiny? There's this . . . excitement and intensity in her that I've never seen before."

Chris chuckled. "Everything you're telling me sounds like what happens in a relationship. It just sounds to me like . . . she's into you because she's into you. The question is how do you feel about this? Are you into her? Do you like her?"

Shay recalled the unexpected delight at hearing from Delphine Cormier again the week after their last session. The introduction to Delphine's blunt self-possession. The laughter Delphine inspired in her. The boundaries Delphine carefully tested. The growing warmth—ease—openness—solicitude—regard—professed esteem—that was fostered through exposure. The newfound nervous anticipation to see Delphine. The banked thrill of being the recipient of Delphine's ebullient smiles and exuberance.

Holding Delphine's hand.

Kissing Delphine.

Cuddling up close.
Shay closed her eyes. "I like her."

"Then go with the flow," urged Chris. "Do the Zen thing. Be in the moment. Enjoy it! You don't have to marry her tomorrow." Chris paused. "You're not marrying her tomorrow, are you?"

Shay released a hapless giggle. "No."

"Good, because Nadia and I have plans for tomorrow that we can't cancel and I'd be disappointed if I missed your wedding."

Shay smiled.

"I know it's scary to put yourself and your feelings in someone else's hands," Chris said, voice grown somber and soft. "I know you've worked really hard. But the risk is worth taking. At some point you have to stop holding yourself back. And if you're looking for permission to be happy, here it is: Be happy. Shay. Stop beating yourself up for stuff that happened and stuff that hasn't happened yet. You're not the same person from ten or five years ago. And no one is expecting you to be perfect. It's okay not to be. She's not gonna be perfect, either."

Shay covered her mouth, trapping the tremble of her jaw behind it.

"Shay?"

She dropped her hand and briefly covered the microphone to steady her breathing. "I'm here."

"I love you, okay? Whatever happens. If this works out, if it doesn't work out. You've got me, Paul, and Mom. And Dad. You can call anytime you need me."

Shay nodded. "I love you, too."

"And give yourself some credit, eh? You can let yourself believe that Delphine likes you for who you are."

Shay huffed. "Okay."

"That didn't sound very confident," Chris said, "but we'll just say for now that there's room for improvement."

"I'm flunking but you're not flunking me," Shay said, finding a note of teasing to inject into her voice. "Thanks."

"I wouldn't say you're at an F," Chris said, "but you have to put in some work to start hitting the B's."

Shay smiled past the wateriness in her eyes. "Extra credit."

"Extra credit?"

Shay shook her head. "Nothing."

"Well, you've got your assignment," Chris said.

"No one likes homework," Shay said.

"It won't feel like work if you're enjoying it," Chris said with the jovial cheekiness of educator encouragement.
"You're such a teacher," marveled Shay.

Chris laughed in delight. But, for all the smugness, Shay suspected her brother would turn out right. When she hung up, after being administered a quiz fishing for more specific details about Delphine and issued sideways intimations that she should come out for Christmas, Shay was smiling.

She felt less encumbered, granted greater clarity, more anchored. The buoyant, stretching lightness lingered in the wings of her consciousness. Shay didn't turn away. She let go. A little. Like a bud unfurled petals. Unsure, still, if she'd be carried away or cast back down. But she could go resisting and battered or slip into the stream and ride the current to the destination.

Shay was going.
One way or another.

* 

There was work to do. Delphine knew what the work entailed. She knew how to do it. She was doing it. Her hands separated and mixed samples and solutions, handled vials and pipettes, pressed buttons and keyedin commands. Her eyes peered into microscopes and at slides, passed over text and readouts, letters and numbers, labels and screens. Her body moved through the various rooms and halls, from one piece of equipment to the next, backtracking when she misremembered, sometimes idling midway, purpose and intent forgotten.

All of Delphine occupied the laboratory but for her mind.

It was back in Shay's apartment. In the restaurant. In the walk through the parking lot.

It was hobbled on the fact that Shay had stayed in bed first thing in the morning but gently pushed Delphine out the door to go to work. It was reviewing Shay's proclamations and protestations of uncertainty in her ability to gauge Delphine's sincerity. It was replaying the gradual distraction and silence that encroached on breakfast. It was snagged on Shay's startled reaction when Delphine reached for her hand.

Had last night not gone well? Had it been disappointing? Was Shay pulling back and reconsidering? Was Shay biding time to wrap disillusionment in a palatable package?

Had Delphine's perception ignored auxiliary signals outside of the care, exploration, and patience that she had felt through Shay's fingers? But for her back. Which Delphine had notched as its own positive sign.

Delphine had an urge to ask someone.

She wanted to ask Shay.

"I wasn't going to say anything—" cut in the voice of Delphine's sole companion in the space they'd designated the "computer lab," drawing Delphine's attention to an attendant smirk. "—but I don't think we have a strict dress code around here, our security friends notwithstanding."

Delphine summoned a small smile. "Maybe it's more comfortable."

Cosima interlaced her fingers and settled her hands upon the crown of her head. "Than what? Not pajamas. Pajamas are the height of comfort." Cosima took a second to reconsider her statement. "Unless you don't like clothes, then I guess the height of comfort would be nudity. But let's stay in the category of clothed."
Delphine lifted a shoulder in a shrug and resumed fiddling at the terminal. "Jeans."

Cosima tilted her head left and right in ambivalent consideration. "I guess. I could see it. I mean, I'm not that big on jeans, either. A snug pair of leggings will get you farther in this weather. But I don't hate jeans. Do you?"

"I'm fine with jeans," Delphine said mildly, "and I am comfortable in dress pants. Sometimes more comfortable if the dress pants are looser."

"They have different cuts of jeans, you know, like straight-leg and boyfriend styles that aren't so clingy. You don't have to wear, like, skinny jeans even though they're the current fashion trend."

Delphine smiled. "I'm aware. I meant looser around the hips."

Cosima sat up straighter, interlocked fingers slipping apart. "Oh. Right. Because—because of the thing, because of your hip." Uncertainty pulled down Cosima's brow. "You hurt your hip, right? We—we talked about it. Right?"

"I'm not sure we talked about it," Delphine said, a laugh in her throat, "but it came up, yes."

"Yeah, I have a vague memory of that," Cosima said slowly. "So how did you hurt your hip?"

"I didn't," Delphine said. "A car did."

Cosima froze. "Jeez." She leaned back. "That must have been rough. And that's how you met Shay, in recovery?"

Delphine nodded. "Eventually. Near the end of the ordeal."

"That makes sense. Though it still doesn't explain how you ended up friends."

"Maybe there is no explanation," Delphine said. Delphine considered Cosima out of the corner of her gaze. "May I ask you a question?"

A generous mood infected Cosima. "Shoot."

"What was it about . . . your ex that attracted you?"

"You mean my previous monitor?"

Caught out for her deliberate word choice, Delphine said, "Yes."

Cosima smirked. "Where's this coming from?"

"Curiosity," Delphine said.

"Curiosity killed the cat," Cosima sang out. "This wasn't in my file?"

Delphine shook her head. "I don't see how it could be. I mean your specific answer and feelings. Unless you told your monitor—or, I guess, kept a diary—anything in the file would be speculation—based on observation, but still speculation." Delphine glanced at Cosima. "The DYAD hasn't developed technology that can read your thoughts directly." Delphine flicked an eyebrow. "As far as I know."

Cosima grinned. "God, could you imagine? Who would they test it on? Leekie? That would give us a direct window into the ego of a firstrate narcissist."
Delphine couldn't help the twitch of her lips toward a smirk.

Cosima cocked her head in a study of Delphine. "You know about Emi, right?"

Delphine shook her head. "Not really."

Cosima flung her arms wide in objection. "Aw, c'mon! You're a research scientist. I'm your subject. You can't expect me to believe that you didn't do your homework." Cosima leaned upon an arm of the chair. "Look, I don't care if you lied to me before because you felt like you had to gain my trust. Let's—" Cosima swept her hand laterally through the air. "—shove that aside and drop the bullshit."

"Okay," Delphine said, tone even, eyes on Cosima. "But it wasn't bullshit. There were notes—reports—made by your monitors, but—" Delphine's delivery dropped into utterance. "—it didn't feel right."

A wall of silence met her statement. Cosima's lips parted, eyes narrowed in concentration.

"Seriously?" demanded Cosima.

Delphine nodded. "Yes. It didn't feel right by that point."

"By that point?"

Delphine gazed back at Cosima without elaboration.

"After what? After Jennifer?" Cosima's eyes crinkled with doubt. "But you weren't her monitor."

Delphine turned back to the glow of the screen. "No, I wasn't."

"But something happened that spooked you?"

Delphine exhaled through her nose. "I was given access." She stared at the taskbar at the bottom of the screen. "I saw what Aldous got to see. I asked for it."

Cosima crossed her arms, shoulders hunching. "It freaked you out?"

Delphine nodded. "It made it—hard. Harder. Before that, I was aware that my interactions with Jennifer contained a lie, that I wasn't exactly what she thought I was. But it felt . . . harmless is not the right word, but I knew I was there to help her. But then I saw some of her most private thoughts. Things I wasn't meant to see. Things I didn't need to see as her physician. And then every time we spoke I knew she was lying to us. And I knew we were lying to her. We were all lying and we were all pretending we weren't. It wasn't . . ." Delphine raked her teeth across her lower lip. "I shouldn't have been surprised, this was the purpose and function of the monitor system, but it was different in practice."

"Spying was different in practice," Cosima said.

Delphine met Cosima's stony gaze. "Yes. I wasn't prepared to . . . start the same way with you."

"You wanted to learn about me the legit way?" Cosima asked, smirk hinting at genuine amusement.

"I thought it would make things easier."

"For you."

"Yes," Delphine said. "For me. It did not take long to see that you would not believe me. But that
was fair."

Cosima glanced away. "Well, you read some stuff on me."

"Your medical history, yes."

Cosima raised her hands above her head in a stretch and threw herself back against the chair. "Well, then, here's some of my dating history. Emi and I went to school together at Berkeley. We were in the same graduate program. She was smart, cute, and had what she called a point of view, but which the rest of us called an attitude. She had this whole punk rock aesthetic going on. You know, she was bold, the person who sticks out in a crowd. She was actually the lead singer of a punk rock band, which was also hot." Cosima shrugged. "And she was good in bed." Cosima contemplated a spot on the floor. "Really good. Like, that probably contributed to how much we overlooked a lot of our differences."

"What do you mean?"

Cosima shrugged. "Emi and I weren't the most compatible people. I was cool with each of us doing our own things, hanging out whenever we had time, keeping it chill, but Emi always wanted to spend more time together, talk about stuff, rail against the system, hate on sheeple, that sort of thing. In retrospect all of that makes a lot more sense, but Emi in general was intense. We had our disagreements and I don't know if I ever considered it working out long-term—but it was fun while it lasted. That's what I thought, anyway."

"Are you suggesting that if the sex had not been so agreeable, then perhaps your relationship would have ended sooner?"

Cosima smirked at Delphine's tactical vocabulary. "Maybe? It was the one thing that we never disagreed on. In fact, it ended a lot of spats." Cosima grinned. "If you know what I mean."

Delphine shook her head, but with a trace of a smile.

"It was the time I felt most connected to her," added Cosima. "It's probably not a great sign when you prefer not talking to someone. Which is one of the reasons I told her not to follow me when I went to Minnesota. I didn't see the point of asking her to give up everything when I didn't want more from her than—" Cosima twitched a shoulder. "—the fun we had. Emi didn't agree." Cosima shook her head. "Honestly, I'm still not sure why she insisted on coming with me. Like, the monitor gig couldn't have been that good, monetary wise, or Emi had a lot less integrity than I thought, even factoring in that she was the type of person willing to spy on me." Cosima's chin dimpled in thought. "It's possible that Emi was actually into me—way more than I was into her. Which—wouldn't have worked out, however you sliced it."

Delphine proceeded with caution. "Do you mean that you didn't love her?"

Cosima studied the wall. "I loved Emi. I mean, I cared about her. If she was healthy, if she was doing well in her classes, if she was sad or happy. But I don't think I was ever in love with her. And I had no expectations of falling in love with her."

"What's the difference between loving someone and being in love with them? How could you tell?"

Cosima considered Delphine, then shrugged. "I guess a clue is that I didn't speculate where she and I would be in, like, five, ten years. I didn't envision building a life with her or what it might look like. When we were apart, I wasn't dying to see her again. And when we broke up—I was fine. It seemed like something I had to do and, when I did, I didn't have many second thoughts. There were bigger
things to worry about."

Delphine nodded.

Cosima eyed Delphine. "And, you know, when I saw you, I had to admit—grudgingly—that Leekie had my number better than I thought. Which is something I would never tell him."

Delphine dropped her gaze to the keyboard. "I'm sorry to disappoint."

"Yeah, well," Cosima said with a sigh, "I guess it would have been hypocritical to have it both ways—resenting DYAD trying to entrap me with a pretty face but then being okay with it because, well, what a pretty face. On the plus side, it turns out you and I are capable of conversation."

"Finally," Delphine said.

"Better late than never," Cosima said. "I'm pretty sure even without all of this, Emi and I would have ended up at never."

"But there's a chance she wanted better late," Delphine posited.

"Yeah, well, it takes two to tango," Cosima declared.

"You were already . . . tangoing," Delphine attempted, haltingly, her mind manipulating English conjugation rules with growing doubt. "How was she supposed to know you wanted to cut the dance short?"

"A good start would have been to listen to what I was saying and taking me at my word," Cosima said. "Forcing her way into my life after I said I was done wasn't going to accomplish anything. The moment she stopped respecting what I wanted—if she ever cared—put a nail in the coffin."

Cosima's assertion lodged in Delphine's mind for the remainder of the day, where Delphine occasionally turned it in her mind as she waited for an analysis, process, or printing project to complete, the seed of a small worry descending through the cracks of her thoughts, seeking fertile ground in which to sprout, germinating iterations of What if . . . ? What if . . . ? What if . . . ?

What if Delphine was missing a signal? What if Shay was bowing out of their dance? What if Delphine had pushed—was pushing—too hard? What if Delphine had asked for too much?

How would Delphine know if she'd already missed the signs?

*

When her eye detected the lateness of the hour in the corner of a tablet screen, Delphine hesitated. She rested her hand upon her phone, reluctant and nervous, and gathered resolve.

There was a message.

From Shay [20:07]: I hope the day hasn't been too busy and that u got dinner.

Delphine smiled, tension bleeding out of her neck and shoulders.

To Shay [21:37]: I'm sorry I missed your message. We did take a break to eat. I'm trying to make sure that Cosima eats regular meals.

From Shay [21:38]: If Cosima is the excuse that makes u eat regular meals then that is ok by me.

From Shay [21:38]: Do u have to stay much longer?
Delphine rubbed at her face and looked around. She was alone with the centrifuges. She gathered pages of printouts and wandered from room to room, peeking inside. She found Scott and Cosima in the break room, which Delphine thought of as the kitchen, but which Cosima called the new chill zone.

"Hey," Cosima said. Scott raised the soda can in his grip in greeting.

"Do you want a ride home?" Delphine asked.

"Heading out?" Cosima asked.

Delphine nodded. "I think so. I have a few cultures incubating. There's more to do but—there's always going to be more to do now. Hopefully."

Technically, they'd all put in a complete day's work.

Cosima craned her neck around. It took Delphine a moment to realize she was looking for a clock. "I guess it is getting late." Cosima rolled to sit up, stockinged feet feeling around for her boots. "Sure, I could use a ride. Are you going to hang around, Scottie?"

"Nah," Scott said. "I'll follow you out. Maybe get in a few rounds of Hearthstone. You wanna play?"

"Maybe another time," Cosima said. "I'm going to catch up on sleep."

"Did you not sleep last night?" Delphine asked.

Cosima shrugged. "Eh."

"Does Professor Duncan need transportation?" Delphine asked.

Cosima shook her head. "He said he didn't mind spending nights here. Though I think we need to bring him more clothes. I don't think this place comes with laundry service."

"Bringing him more clothes won't solve the issue of the dirty ones," Delphine said.

"One thing at a time," Cosima said.

Delphine's chin jerked in a manner akin to a shrug. Cosima didn't seem worried, which gave Delphine an inkling that the problem would eventually fall into her lap, as if she were still a pseudo-administrator in their new setting. "Why don't you gather your things and I'll meet you at the door?"

To Shay [21:46]: No. I think I will take your message as a sign to go home.
From Shay [21:46]: Do u want to come over?

The pixels on the screen wavered beneath Delphine's unflinching scrutiny as if a hidden message lurked between the miniscule spaces between dots.

To Shay [21:47]: Are you sure? By the time I get there it will be past the time you go to bed.
From Shay [21:47]: It's Sunday. It was already a cheat day. Might as well take it all the way.

Torquing at the wrist, Delphine swiveled her phone to view it from one angle, then another, as if the text might reveal more if looked at differently.

What was it that Cosima had said? That Emi should have taken her at her word?
To Shay [21:48]: Are you sure?
From Shay [21:48]: Come over. If u want.

Delphine smiled.

To Shay [21:49]: Of course I want to. I'll be there soon.
From Shay [21:49]: Don't rush. I'll be up.

Shay was up, wearing pajamas and a bright-eyed smile to answer the door, and stepped into the hall to welcome Delphine with a kiss that lengthened and lingered.

"Long day?" Shay asked softly.

"Longer without you," Delphine said.

"Really?"

"Don't believe me?" Delphine asked with a lilt of teasing that countervailed the tightening in her stomach.

Shay searched Delphine's eyes. Delphine picked out the striations in the blue irises. Shay touched Delphine's jaw.

"I think I know what you mean," Shay said.

Delphine smiled. "Yes?"

"Yeah," Shay said, eyes sharpening with the prospect of an admonishment in readied answer to whatever she saw fomenting in Delphine's expression. Shay captured Delphine's hand. "Come in."

Shay said it in the same way Delphine had read her invitation, in the same manner her mouth had greeted Delphine's, in the same timbre she gave credence to Delphine's assertion—without hesitation, without restraint, without doubt.

Delphine read the signs and heeded. She followed Shay.

No hesitation. No restraint. No doubts.

They stepped inside. Together.

Chapter End Notes

... The End.

It wouldn't be a bad spot to end, eh? XD
A knock at her door Monday evening made Shay falter as she stepped out of the bathroom. A glance at the kitchen clock confirmed Shay’s sense that it was relatively early in the evening. With no visitors on the docket, Shay approached the door with banked curiosity and peeked through the glass panel. From the other side Cosima waved at her with a gloved hand. Shay hesitated, wondering if she'd missed a message from Delphine, but opened the door with a smile.

"Hey," Shay said. She noted the tote Cosima gripped in one hand. "Home already?"

Cosima froze in the formation of an animated reply, gears turning behind her gaze, and then eased into a smile. "You mean from work? No, I've, uh, been home all day. I . . . sorta slept in and woke up at, like, noon."

"Are you feeling okay?" Shay asked, peering closer at Cosima's pinkened cheeks and nose.

Cosima batted away Shay's concern with her free hand. "I'm fine, I'm fine. My body just wanted sleep." Cosima's smile slipped sideways. "And . . . maybe I didn't set my alarm."

That would explain Delphine's frequent and increasing glances at her cell phone that morning before they'd stepped out the door. Delphine had ventured up a floor but Shay had set out for work before Delphine had descended. Shay wondered if Delphine had tried hard or long to get a response at Cosima's door. "So you played hooky?"

"Caught up on sleep," Cosima revised. "That's important, too."

"It is," Shay agreed.

"Anyway," Cosima said, "I saw you outside coming in but I was too far away to shout at you, so I thought I'd drop by and say hi."

Shay smiled. "Hi."

"Hi," Cosima chirped back with an impish smile.

"Want to come in?" Shay asked. "I was about to start on dinner."

"Are you sure?" Cosima asked. "I don't want to be any trouble."

"Come in," Shay said, waving Cosima inside. "Would you like tea?"

"Are you having any?" Cosima asked, stepping inside and unwinding her scarf. She lifted the tote. "I have, uh, bread. And cookies."

Shay giggled. "Is that all you bought?" She reached for the kettle. "Is it okay if I make herbal tea? How do you feel about rooibos? And tofu?"

"Whoa, twenty questions," Cosima said. "Rooibos sounds great—as long as you didn't mean rooibos and tofu together in some kind of soup. I mean, I know tofu doesn't taste like much on its own, but rooibos wouldn't be my flavoring of choice."
Shay smirked and took down a tin filled with sachets of rooibos. "It wouldn't be mine, either. I was thinking more along the lines of garlic for the tofu. I could bake some tofu, coat it in a Chinese-style garlic sauce, and steam broccoli and rice for the sides?"

"Dude, that sounds way better than whatever I was going to do."

"What were you going to do?" Shay asked.

Cosima shrugged. "I don't know. A salad, or maybe a peanut butter sandwich, or heat up a can of soup. Something like that."

"Is that what you were out picking up? Do you need to take your groceries upstairs?" Shay asked.

"Nah, I didn't buy anything that needs to be refrigerated," Cosima said. She paused and peered into the tote. "I don't think."

Shay smiled. "You can run upstairs if you need to. I'm not going anywhere and I won't lock you out."

Cosima eyed her skeptically. "Promise?"

Shay chuckled. "Promise."

By the time Cosima returned, shorn of tote and outerwear, the tea was ready, tofu was sitting in the oven, rice was measured and rinsed, and Shay was sorting out the broccoli situation.

"Alright, chef, what do you need me to do?" Cosima said, making a show of rolling up her sleeves.

"Enjoy your tea," Shay said, pointing at the mug on the table.

"Really? There's nothing I can help with? I'm not an invalid," Cosima said.

Shay shook her head. "I didn't say you were. What you are is my guest, so you can park yourself over there and keep me company."

"Do you boss Delphine around like this?" Cosima griped, eyes doubtful.

"I did," answered Shay promptly, "when she was still new to being a guest in my place."

"Dude, it's not like we met yesterday," complained Cosima.

"But it's not like we see each other everyday," countered Shay.

"Do we have to meet on the daily for me to graduate beyond the 'guest' stage?" wondered Cosima as she reluctantly took a seat. "That can't be how Delphine did it—because you said you 'did' boss Delphine around, past tense."

Shay smiled to herself. "Delphine and I didn't see each other everyday, but it's taken this long for us to evolve into cooperation."

"I can evolve!" protested Cosima. "I'm all for evolution. Darwinism is my jam."

"If I remember my science classes correctly," Shay said, "evolution is a slow process. It takes time."

"On a large scale, across a whole species, yeah, it can be slow," hedged Cosima. "But evolution can be guided and even sped up. Humans have been doing it for a long time with all sorts of organisms,
from dogs to crops, and nowadays we're going even faster with new tools and a better understanding of the process. Heck, mutations can happen in the blink of an eye—radiation degrades DNA or a cell copies a protein wrong and, bam, you've got a whole new molecular order that gets duplicated again and again."

It was a lecture Delphine would have given Shay.

"Well," Shay called out, "consider me in the Stone Ages, then, because all I want is for you to enjoy your tea while it's hot." Shay threw a smile over her shoulder to soften the assertion of her hostess authority. "There's not much left to do. We're pretty much just waiting for the tofu to bake."

"Alright," Cosima conceded grudgingly, enfolding the mug between her hands. "Do you mind if I sit on the couch?"

"Not at all, go ahead." Shay rummaged up the steamer basket, calling over, "How've you been?"

"Still alive and kickin'," Cosima proclaimed offhandedly. Shay glanced over but only caught sight of Cosima settling onto the couch, pulling her legs up underneath her and cradling the mug upon her thigh. "Is that what you meant?"

"Not exactly," Shay conceded cautiously, "but that's definitely good news. How've you been feeling?"

"Well, I guess if we're looking for good news, I can say that the flu remains the low point of feeling shitty," Cosima said. "It won't stay the lowest point, but for now it still is."

Shay eyed the amount of water she'd put in the smaller pot with the rice and let it sit to boil. "But it could get better instead of worse, right? Delphine mentioned that you're looking at new information or trying new things or something like that?"

"Yeah? What else does Delphine mention?"

"I don't know any details," Shay said, chuckling a little at her own expense. "Even if she told me details, I probably wouldn't understand any of it."

"Don't sell yourself short so quickly," Cosima said. "Trying to explain the details can actually be more fun than trying to see them through."

"What do you mean?"

Cosima shrugged. "A lot of science can be waiting around or combing through a mountain of information looking for a specific piece of hay in a haystack."

Shay smiled. "Delphine said something similar."

Cosima threw up a hand. "Well, in that case . . . do you even need another scientist friend? It sounds like Delphine has that quota filled."

"You and Delphine may both be scientists," Shay said, smile widening, "but I don't think anyone would confuse the two of you."

"You're right," Cosima said. "She's tall and blonde and, while I could go blonde, I couldn't go tall."

Shay giggled. "You're preaching to the choir."

"Eh, height's overrated," Cosima declared. "Who needs to easily reach top shelves? That's why
humans learned how to climb and invented stools—so that we could build storage compartments out of reach for the average person."

"Average, yes!" Shay echoed, lifting up the lid on the pot of rice to take a peek. "I tell my brother I'm average height but it's like he refuses to hear me. Hey, is white rice okay?"

"It's all okay," Cosima said. "Whatever you want to do."

"Okay. Just making sure." Shay checked the timer on her phone for the progress of the tofu. "Would you go blonde?"

"Aaaaah," Cosima mused, "y'know, I don't really feel it—but . . . I think I could make it work. Maybe not with the dreads, but—yeah, I could pull off blonde."

Shay leaned against the counter to face Cosima and picked up her mug. "Have you always worn your hair like that?"

Cosima shook her head. "No. The dreads didn't happen until, like, after undergrad."

"Why then? Any particular reason?"

Cosima shrugged. "No, not really. I was taking time off before grad school, traveling, whatnot. It was just sorta one of the things that happened along the way."

"Where did you go?"

"Europe. A little bit of South and Southeast Asia."

"Wow. It sounds like you were over there for a while."

Cosima grinned. "Yeah, I bummed around for a bit. I got all my tests and letters of recommendation out of the way, grabbed my passport, filled a backpack, and got on a plane."

"Did you go with someone or by yourself?"

"By myself, but I met so many people abroad, mostly tourists because we all spoke English."

"That sounds amazing," Shay said.

"It was. I totally recommend it. I'd do it again—maybe not roughing it so much, but, yeah, totally."

Shay smiled, but mostly because Cosima had spoken of the scenario as if it were one she could repeat. Shay turned to check the rice and remembered the broccoli. Soon every component was cooking. Shay asked Cosima's about the highlights of her travels to pass the remaining twenty minutes and when the components came together they sat down side-by-side at the table.

"Aw, man, this is good," waxed Cosima. "I'm so glad I stopped by to say hi."

Shay raised an eyebrow. "Is that all I am, a good meal?"

"No, not just a good meal, you're pretty decent company, too," Cosima said with a grin. "But what can really compete with delicious home-cooked food that you didn't have to make?"

"So we can forget that the congee happened?" Shay posed.

"Why would we forget that?" Cosima objected. "I ate the congee. Happily. Maybe it needed a little
help, but only—" Cosima pinched at the air, leaving a tiny gap between her fingertips. "—a little. Like with stove-top ramen where you have to add extra ingredients to take it to the next level, but the base content is all there, totally saving you a world of trouble."

Shay sawed at the stem of a piece of broccoli with the edge of her spoon. "That congee could not compete with stove-top ramen, let's be honest. Stove-top ramen can be pretty tasty. But . . . at least the congee was healthier? It had less sodium."

"Way less. Like, my blood pressure thanks you, for sure."

Shay grinned.

"Seriously, though, it was awesome," Cosima said. "I don't think Delphine was going to make me dinner, at least not one half as wholesome as that."

"She probably would have gotten takeout, which probably would have been tastier," Shay admitted.

"But not as thoughtful," asserted Cosima, punctuating the air with her spoon.

Shay smiled.

"Stop trashing the congee," Cosima said. "I appreciated it. Really."

"But this is better," Shay said with a smile.

Cosima grinned. "No contest."

Shay set her spoon aside and crossed her arms upon the table.

Cosima watched her warily. "You're putting on some serious serious face."

Shay nodded. "I might want to ask you a serious question."

"Ah. I see," Cosima said, unenthused. "Should I say thank you for waiting until after I ate?"

Shay smiled thinly.

"I mean, thank you for feeding me, of course—but do I have to answer?" asked Cosima with a note of dismay. "Is that the price of a meal?"

Shay shook her head. "No, not if you don't want to."

"Oh. Well then," Cosima said, almost cheerily. "Shoot."

Shay leaned forward. "How are you doing here?" Shay tapped her temple. "And here?" Shay tapped over her heart.

Cosima's eyebrows rose incrementally. "That is a serious question." She shrugged. "Reports seem to indicate that, while plenty of my organs are unhappy, my brain is unaffected and my heart is still one of the lucky ones. It's still beating, anyway."

They studied one another until Cosima smirked.

Shay bowed her head, a few chuckles escaping helplessly. She couldn't argue that those weren't answers to her questions. "That's . . . good news. We can always use more of that. And from what I hear, those are pretty important organs."
"Do you always downplay your knowledge?" Cosima wondered.

Shay shrugged. "When it comes to science, I figure I should leave it to the pros."

"Dude, what did Delphine do to you?"

Shay shook her head. "She didn't do anything."

"Yeah," Cosima said skeptically, "that's not really the behavior of someone who isn't gun shy about voicing her opinions."

"I'm not going to say whether that's true or not," Shay said with a warning look, "but why would you assume that Delphine has anything to do with it? Maybe that's just the way I am. Maybe I've always been that way."

Cosima nodded. "That's fair. Have you always been this way?"

Shay attempted a smile. "I don't know. No one's ever . . . told me that's what I'm like."

Placing her arms on the tabletop, Cosima sloughed sideways to lean upon her elbow. "What do people tell you that you're like?"

Shay shrugged, smiling. "That I'm nosy?"

"People tell you that?"

Shay chuckled. "No. They don't. Not in so many words. But I know I'm like that."

"Yeah? Is that why you ask about—" Cosima tapped her temple. "—this?"

Shay nodded. "I guess so, yeah."

"Are you going to keep asking about it?"

"Probably," Shay conceded. "Unless you tell me to stop."

"Why?"

"Like, why do I want to ask?"

Cosima lifted a shoulder in concession. "Sure."

Shay's brow twitched with uncertainty. "Because . . . it's an important question. And—you might not want to answer it today, but maybe someday you will."

"Yeah, but do you want to hear the answer?"

Shay cycled through the possible angles of Cosima's question and gave up trying to divine the thrust. "What do you mean?"

Cosima leaned into her arms, as if threatening to topple over. "Like—" She rebounded upright. "Look, when most people ask 'How are you?' they're just asking out of politeness. They don't expect you to unload the story of your entire day, or want to hear whether you're feeling on top of the world or like the world's about to end. They expect you to say, 'Fine, thanks,' so that everyone can move on. No one wants to hear someone sick say 'I feel like shit' or 'I'm terrified' or 'I can't sleep at night' or 'everything's fucking unfair.'" Cosima's eyes were hard and unwavering behind her lenses. "And I
don't think that's wrong or anything. If someone says that to you, how are you supposed to react? You can't pretend like everything's okay, because it's not, someone just said it wasn't. No one wants to be put in that position. So, like, . . . yeah. That's what I mean."

Shay passed her thumb across the fingertips of her left hand. "Is that how you feel?"

Cosima shook her head. "No—" Cosima cut off a groan and scratched at her temple. "What I'm saying is that there's no point in making everyone in the room feel shitty."

"But it's okay if you're the only one who feels that way?" inquired Shay.

Cosima sighed. "Nothing is going to change because someone expresses their emotions. Not in this case. Nausea doesn't go away because you say you feel nauseated. Saying it out loud just forces everyone to acknowledge it and focus on it."

"Instead of everyone ignoring it?" asked Shay.

"Is that a bad thing?" Cosima retorted. "I'm okay with that. In fact, if everyone could genuinely ignore it—instead of everyone being uncomfortably aware of it but trying to act like they aren't—it would be so much easier."

"Easier than what?"

"Their pity." Cosima flicked a wrist. "Their discomfort. The way it feels like people walk around me on eggshells." Her gaze darted to the side. "If everyone could be cool and casual, I could tell people what's up without worrying that they'll start looking at me differently or treating me differently or—whatever. Then I wouldn't have to have, like, this conversation."

"Have you had this conversation already?" Shay asked.

Cosima hesitated, eyes jumping back to Shay, then away again. "No."

"So . . ." Shay pushed her napkin around in small circular strokes. "I'm the only jerk not playing along?"

Cosima shook her head, a smirk tugging at her lips. "Yeah." She glanced at Shay out of the edge of her lenses. "Yeah, what's your problem?"

"I'm nosy," Shay said.

"Jesus, Shay," muttered Cosima. Her dreads swayed in a tight arc with the shake of her head. "I don't want to—feel like this. Angry. And annoyed. Not, like, here and now—when you made me dinner and everything was chill. You know?"

Shay dabbed at a spilled dot of sauce on the tabletop, then wiped it off on a napkin. She spoke soft and low. "Do you feel angry a lot?"

Cosima's jaw worked. "I don't know, dude. I have things to focus on. The work. But it's like—it comes in bursts. Flashes. Searing white flashes that I can't control. And I know all about the five stages, but it's not like—it's not some linear progression. All of it just—" Cosima flung a hand out in a hapless gesture. "—creeps up. And I'm okay with keeping it back there—you know—at the back of my mind. This thing is bigger than me. There are people depending on this."

"People?" Shay prodded quietly.
Cosima shook her head.

Shay licked her lips. "I won't ask anymore if you don't want me to."

Cosima eyed Shay with skepticism. "But?"

Shay's lips inched toward a meek smile. "I do want to hear the answer."

Wariness muddied Cosima's gaze. "Why?"

"Because I'm nosy?" Shay attempted to joke. She swallowed and continued, soft, "I know I can't change anything and I don't understand what you're going through, but if you need a time out... if you want someone to know that you're angry or sad or afraid... I'm here."

Cosima shook her head. "Why?"

"Because I'm your friend?" Shay hadn't meant for it to sound like a question.

"Are you? We barely know each other," Cosima said. "I'm just someone who lives upstairs."

Shay shrugged. "Okay, what if you are? That doesn't mean that you have to isolate yourself up there." Shay didn't flinch beneath Cosima's unwavering study. "I don't—I don't know how you feel, but I don't want you to feel alone. If you want to talk, if you want company, if you need a hug—I know how to give hugs." Shay paused with a self-deprecating smile. "And if you want real help, professional help, say the word and I'll help you find someone." Shay searched Cosima's eyes. "I'm here, whether you need any of that or not."

Cosima squinted at Shay. "Is this a karma thing?"

Shay chuckled. "If that's how you want to think of it, sure."

"No, no, for real," Cosima insisted. "I'm curious. Is this a karma thing?" Cosima's eyes narrowed. "Or is it about something else?"

"Decency?" Shay suggested, injecting lightness into her voice.

Cosima shook her head minutely, the intensity of her scrutiny undeterred. "What was it? That you needed help with?"

Shay froze. Their gazes locked. Cosima didn't blink.

Perhaps Shay's hesitation hinted that a vein lay hidden. Perhaps Cosima entered into her line of questioning with the conviction that there was a splinter to expose.

Whether any of those were true, Shay felt unmasked.

In an act of concession, Shay tapped her temple. "This."

"Who helped you?"

Shay exhaled measuredly. "A lot of people. Over a long time. People who didn't give up on me."

"People who didn't stop asking how you were doing?" guessed Cosima.

Shay nodded with a tinge of surrender. "Right."
"I'm not going to be anyone's pity project," declared Cosima.

"That's—that's not what this is," breathed Shay. "But if that's how you feel, tell me . . . and I'll drop it."

"What you went through and what I'm going through," continued Cosima, stony, "is not the same."

"I know."

"But I know what it's like to be . . . stuck in your own head. And I don't want you to wind up there, not without knowing there are ways out."

Cosima adopted a lopsided grin. "And you're gonna pull me out if that happens?"

Shay shook her head. "No one pulls you out. You find your way. But sometimes you need directions. And people telling you that you can do it. And warm meals. And hugs. If you like hugs."

Cosima bowed her head, lips settling into a soft smile. "Hugs are pretty great."

Making a hesitant assessment of Cosima's agreement, Shay stretched out an arm. Cosima eyed the offer, brows furrowed, and, with a sharp breath, leaned across the gap between their chairs and rested her head upon Shay's shoulder. Shay pulled Cosima close, laid a hand upon Cosima's head, and said no more on the subject for the remainder of the night.

* *

To Shay [20:47]: I feel I can call it a day soon. Are you home? May I come over?

From Shay [20:48]: Sorry, maybe not tonight? Cosima and I are watching a movie.

To Shay [20:48]: What movie? How is Cosima? I didn't see her today. I sent her messages but her replies didn't say much.

From Shay [20:49]: Blade runner. Cosima said she was in the mood for it. She looks okay. No fever, as far as I can tell. I think she wanted to take a rest day.

To Shay [20:50]: Maybe I should have done the same. Then perhaps I could be watching a movie with you.

From Shay [20:50]: Is it OK if Cosima and I hang out tonight? I could ask Cosima if it's OK if u want to join us.

To Shay [20:51]: Of course it's okay. You and I didn't have plans. Did Cosima go to you?

From Shay [20:51]: Sort of. She dropped in to say hi and we started hanging out.

To Shay [20:52]: Then she likely needed to get away from everyone else. Which means you two should enjoy the movie and I should return to my apartment and make sure it's still there.

From Shay [20:52]: I don't think it disappeared over the weekend.

To Shay [20:53]: Are you sure? After spending this weekend with you, it feels like everything could be changed.

From Shay [20:53]: Sometimes I think u say stuff like that bc of those times I said u weren't romantic.

To Shay [20:54]: I say them because I mean them.

From Shay [20:55]: Do you believe me?

To Shay [20:55]: It's hard to tell if u r just teasing me.

From Shay [20:56]: I can't tease you while also meaning what I say?

To Shay [20:57]: that sounds like it should be a contradiction but I know what u mean?

From Shay [20:57]: That I say what I mean.

To Shay [20:57]: u r a brat

From Shay [20:58]: Do you mean that?

To Shay [20:58]: Yes. :)

To Shay [20:58]: I thought so.
From Shay [20:59]: But I guess u r my brat now.
From Shay [20:59]: So I brought this on myself.
To Shay [21:00]: Or the universe did.
From Shay [21:00]: U don't mean that.
To Shay [21:01]: I don't. You're right. But I mean it when I say that I miss you. However, I will let you and Cosima enjoy the movie. Maybe I will get to see you tomorrow.
From Shay [21:01]: :)
To Shay [21:02]: If the universe will let me.
From Shay [21:02]: Brat
To Shay [21:03]: Your brat.
From Shay [21:03]: As long as u want to be.
To Shay [21:04]: As long as you let me.
From Shay [21:04]: Gonna watch the movie. Eat if u haven't eaten!
To Shay [21:05]: I will. Let me know when you are going to bed?
From Shay [21:05]: K
To Shay [21:05]: Talk to you later.

Chapter End Notes

This is not a triumphant return. I do not have a lot of material waiting to be posted, but I finally did read over and edit this draft, so instead of having it sit and serve no one, I thought posting it was just as well because I don't think even if I wrote five more parts from now that I would make significant changes and sometimes setting a piece in "stone" means that I can't overthink a picture that has, by this point, become too big to hold in my head as a whole.

At some point during the hiatus, I did reread this fic and corrected typos I noticed. It's impossible for me to catch everything, but if anyone has looked back at any chapter and felt that something small was different, it's quite possible I fixed a word or reworded a sentence.

If you are reading this note now, thank you for reading this oddball fic. :)
"There are four basic gun safety rules that you need to obey at all times," Eric told Delphine, eyes stern behind safety glasses, neck accessorized with a pair of padded earmuffs. "Some say there are three, but I'm giving you four. One, treat all firearms like they're loaded. I don't care if the magazine has been removed, there could be a bullet in the chamber. Two, never point a gun at anything or anyone that you don't intend to shoot. Three, keep your finger off the trigger until you're ready to shoot. And four, know your target and what's beyond it. Bullets go past things and through things—cans, walls, windows, doors, ceilings, cars, floors. Anything and anyone behind them can become a target you didn't intend to hit. Also something to keep in mind: when you shoot up into the air, bullets go up and then they come down. They're not rockets you fire off into space. Got it?"

Delphine managed not to gape. At Eric, dressed casually for the day in khakis and a polo shirt. At the lecture. At the unfamiliar environment of the shooting range. At the turns of her life that had brought her to this moment, listening to this man, having this lesson, and, somehow, seriously, seeking to add firearm proficiency to her list of skills—or operating competence, at least.

Eric hadn't let her lay a finger upon a gun yet.

He recycled through the rules until Delphine repeated them back without trouble. He instructed her about stances, pantomimed a two-handed grip with his empty hands, and determined her dominant eye by making her peer at the tip of his nose through a triangle she formed using her hands.

"Right eye," he murmured. "Good. That'll make things easier."

On two different guns—the small firearm Sarah had "gifted" to her and a larger pistol he brought—Eric demonstrated how to load bullets into the magazine, how to insert the magazine and release it. With practiced ease, he "chambered" a bullet by pulling the slide and met Delphine's eyes with unflinching intensity. "Now the gun's loaded." He ejected the magazine and yanked back the slide, dispensing a bullet from the pistol. "Now it's not."

When he urged her to come forward, Delphine felt a tremble course through her hands.

At the sensation of the cool metal beneath her fingertips, Delphine's mind threatened to blank. But Eric walked her through every step, patient, steady, his voice never rising or falling, blunt and straightforward. When he told her to put on the safety glasses and earmuffs, he prefaced it by saying, "Always wear eye and ear protection when you're shooting. But keep in mind that if you ever discharge a gun outside of a controlled setting like this, it's going to be loud. It might shock you and people are going to hear it. Got it?"

Delphine nodded.

Eric stepped up first and had Delphine stand behind him and watch. He demonstrated each stance, how to arrange her hands around the grip in a hold that was decidedly uncomfortable and awkward, how to place her finger outside of the trigger guard, how to aim using the front and back sights in conjunction.

The first muzzle flash made Delphine jump.

In a blink, a pinprick appeared in the target form.

Eric fired twice more, placed the pistol on the counter, stepped back, and gestured for Delphine to step up. The large pistol felt heavy, off-balance in her hands as she raised it. Her pulse kicked in her
ears. Sweat wet the underarms of her shirt. Her breaths shortened.

The sights wavered.

"Take a breath," said Eric.

Delphine closed her eyes. She thought of Shay. Doing yoga. Breathing with deliberation and precision through exercises. Delphine followed along with the pace of her memory and opened her eyes again.

"Breathe," said Eric.

Delphine licked her lips. She tested her stance, planted her feet firmly, left foot leading, right providing a strong support.

"When you're ready," said Eric, "release your breath slowly, line up the sights, and squeeze the trigger."

The bullseye of the target lined up within the two sights.

Delphine slipped her finger upon the trigger and squeezed. And squeezed. The hunk of metal in her hands bucked and a shiny casing jumped out of the top. Delphine gazed at it in amazement, then shifted her attention dazedly to the target paper form.

She'd hit nothing.

Eric stepped up next to her cautiously and nodded. "You did everything right aiming, but trying to pull the trigger changed your line. Now you know what to expect. Try again."

The second time saw a marginal improvement as Delphine struggled less against the trigger. On the third try she nicked the target paper—though nowhere near the painted lines. By the time they worked through the boxes of bullets between them, Eric coaching and criticizing, Delphine was clustering shots according to Eric's instruction: center mass.

*  

"Thank you for taking the time to help me today," Delphine said to Eric over lunch, her treat.

"You're welcome," said Eric. He stabbed at a patch of green leaves in his straightforward salad bowl, an order that had taken Delphine slightly aback when the menu listed numerous options for steak and hamburgers and chicken. "But you should know that there are things I didn't go over today, like gun maintenance and assembly. If you're going to hold onto a gun long-term, you should learn how to care for it. You don't want a gun to break down on you in a firefight." Eric studied her. "Do you intend to carry the gun on you?"

Delphine's breath caught. "I—I don't know."

"Well, don't just stick a gun into the waistband of your pants. If it goes off—which it can—you could end up with a lot of problems and regrets. Unless you're wearing it correctly with a holster. You can get one that goes into your waistband and conceals the gun, but wearing it takes time and adjustments to get used to. What you have now is small enough that you could wear it in an ankle holster, but carrying in there means your access to it may be limited."

Delphine pushed around a wedge of tomato in her own salad.
"Is this overwhelming you?" Eric asked.

Delphine glanced up through her eyelashes. "A little."

"Good," Eric said. "It's better to be overwhelmed now and take the time to think all these things through than find yourself in the middle of a situation without a clue. It's also good to practice. The more familiar you are with handling a firearm, the more automatic your movements and response will be. If your mind checks out, your muscles might not. Practice will make you better and confident, and confidence will take the edge off."

"How would I practice without a license?" Delphine asked.

Eric's mouth set into a line. "That's an inconvenience, but not a barrier. You can go to a shooting range with someone who is licensed—"

"Like you," interjected Delphine.

The muscles around Eric's mouth loosened somewhat. "Right. Or many ranges offer classes or deals where you can shoot with on-site licensed personnel. You can find that information online probably."

Delphine nodded slowly.

"If you can find the time," Eric added.

Delphine smiled weakly. "Yes. Time. There's not much to spare."

"How did you manage to get away today, if I may ask?"

"The lab does not maintain formal business hours, so to speak. It is more like we operate at all hours and take time for ourselves when needed. I am 'running errands.'" Delphine indulged a small smile. "I noticed that you are not at the lab."

Eric nodded. "It's not my assignment."

"It's probably better for you," admitted Delphine. "I cannot imagine it is very exciting to watch over the laboratory."

"It's a bit of hurry up and wait. Most of us are used to it."

The phrase landed inscrutable on Delphine's ears, but she didn't pursue it. Instead, she asked, "Should I still contact you if—something happens?"

Eric nodded. "Sure. I may be able to help, and even if I can't, I can get in touch with the guys who can." Eric studied her. "My recommendation that you don't engage anyone in a confrontation still stands."

Delphine smiled in a feeble showing. "Yes." She hesitated. "Is it... alright to leave a gun in my car? It won't—freeze or... explode?"

Eric smiled with the first indication of real amusement Delphine had seen in him. "It shouldn't freeze or explode—but you run the risk of having it stolen if anyone breaks into your car."

Delphine nodded.

"If I can be honest with you, Dr. Cormier," said Eric, tone softened. Delphine granted him her full
attention. "I'd be most worried about hurting yourself."

It was too late for concern, Delphine almost told him—but what was the need? It was plain and evident that her choices had put her in a position that could be described delicately as screwed.

Cosima attempted to balance a pen upon the bridge of her nose as if it were a high-wire circus feat and Delphine and Scott watched as if it might deliver on the premise. Though Delphine had put in but half a day's work, the downtime swallowed her, welcomed and resented in equal parts, as much as it did her companions.

"Should we get dinner?" Cosima asked, the pen teetering into a stable perch. "We could order take out again. Or should we go out?" Cosima smiled. "We could go out and invite Shay. She might even come this time."

Delphine froze. That morning she had flung an arm out across the bed to encounter cool, flat sheets and the memory that she sprawled in her own bed, alone. The revelation had been a small shock that had detained Delphine in contemplation of the mattress's empty half—that she already expected Shay to occupy that space, that she wanted to reach out and feel Shay there. Cosima's mention of Shay prompted a reflexive smile, but in a split second Delphine pictured meeting Shay at a restaurant with the others in tow and—embracing Shay? Kissing her? Smiling with resignation? Cosima's presence would be like a wall behind which Delphine would have to hide the newfound intimacy.

Unless Delphine revealed she and Shay were dating.

As Scott hummed about whether they should call it a night and leave everyone to their own devices to forage for food, Delphine picked up her phone.

To Shay [18:17]: I haven't told Cosima that we are together. Should I?
From Shay [18:18]: I didn't tell her either. Do u want to tell her? Would u rather not tell her?

Delphine stared at the questions, unsure how to respond and unsure how to frame her ambivalence, to articulate that reservations she harbored derived in no part from shame or embarrassment but surrounded the fact that Shay had served as grounds of contention between herself and Cosima in a proxy invasion of privacy, that withholding this slice of knowledge would be in defiance of Project Leda's encroachment upon the totality of Delphine's life, that Delphine had no basis by which to gauge a potential reaction from Cosima but that the prospect of an insidious one unnerved her with how it felt possible—but to not disclose would mean putting on a degree of pretending and false appearances that wearied even when only imagined, that those efforts and strain were worth neither her time nor Shay's.

Delphine's thumb hovered indecisive over the onscreen keyboard.

The door opened and admitted a voice into the lull. "Is everyone here?"

The voice did not belong to Professor Duncan.

Scott, poised to answer Cosima, turned and gaped. Delphine went still. Cosima sat up straight. The pen skittered across the floor.

Marion Bowles swept her eyes over the three of them. "Is Dr. Duncan not here?"

Delphine swallowed and found her voice first. "He's resting at the moment."
"Is he indisposed?" Marion inquired. "I need to speak with him."

"Why not with all of us?" asked Cosima.

Marion blinked. A moment's consideration relaxed the line of her shoulders. She inclined her head. "Yes. That's what I meant. I'm here to speak with all of you."

Cosima glanced at Delphine, gaze narrowed with suspicion and wariness, and jerked her head minutely, a question forming in her eyes. It took a moment for Delphine to realize that Cosima wasn't simply projecting concern at the unannounced intrusion or skepticism with any element connected to the conspiracy, but drawing attention to the person of Marion herself.

There was something askew in Marion's demeanor. Something shifty in her gaze. Something tired in her posture.

No one seemed capable of moving until Scott volunteered, "I'll—I'll get Professor Duncan." He hurried to the door, drew it open, and lurched back, almost stumbling in haste. "Whoa!"

It was the noise, not Scott's exclamation, that triggered Delphine's confusion, the rattle of wheels that coalesced into the glimpse of the gurney, the black bag conveyed upon it, and the suited man impassively pushing the ensemble farther down the hall.

Scott looked back at his colleagues, eyes wide and lips parted in startled bewilderment.

"What the hell was that?" blurted Cosima.

"A research project for you," Marion said, tone sagging. "I think it'll prove insightful. We'll get to it."

A research project that was clearly a human cadaver. Delphine's lungs struggled to pull in her next breath, her heart beating hard behind her ribs. She reached behind herself blindly, found the edge of the table, and gripped it, steadying herself against a sudden loss of balance.

"Uh," Cosima intoned, "I think we all want to know who the mystery corpse is. How about we talk about it now?"

Cosima's sharpness seemed to penetrate Marion's distraction. Marion glanced at Delphine. "It's not Jennifer Fitzsimmons. And it's not the most pressing issue at hand."

Scott turned on the frozen Scott. "If you could retrieve Dr. Duncan."

Scott looked to Cosima, who stood bullish for a second but relented with a nod. Delphine surrendered her weight against the table and took long pulls of oxygen to clear the lightheadedness that had sent her head spinning.

It wasn't Jennifer.

Cosima crossed her arms. "If it's not Jennifer, who is it?"

"We'll get to it," Marion repeated, implacable. "One other order of business first."

Cosima's mouth set into a grim, begrudging line, unbroken by Scott's return with Professor Duncan.

"Why, hello there," Professor Duncan said, as if tension weren't nestled in every crevice of the room. "Have you come for a cup of tea?"

Marion exhaled into a rueful smile and reached into her coat. "No, Dr. Duncan. I came to show you this."
Marion produced a roll of papers and pressed a finger to a section as she handed it to Professor Duncan. The three excluded parties leaned forward in curiosity. Professor Duncan's eyes narrowed to scrutinize the text.

"What is it?" Cosima asked as Professor Duncan's eyes widened.

"An obituary in today's paper," murmured Professor Duncan, raising his eyes to Marion's face, "for Aldous Leekie. Died of a heart attack. Survived by his mother."

"Holy shit," Cosima breathed, crossed arms loosening as her muscles slackened. "Did you bring Leekie's body as proof?"

Marion huffed sharply, the first real spark of fire kindling in her eyes. "No. I didn't." She gazed at the paper. "This marks the conclusion of some unpleasant business—and the clearing of some misunderstandings." Marion raised her eyes to Professor Duncan's intense gaze. "There's someone who'd like to speak with you."

"Rachel," breathed Professor Duncan. The paper trembled in his grasp. "Is she here?"

Marion shook her head. "No. But a meeting can be arranged for as soon as tomorrow morning."

Professor Duncan deflated somewhat. "Yes, yes. Tomorrow."

"Here?" Cosima asked, voice strangled with distaste.

"If you find it objectionable, then no," Marion said.

"Well," hedged Cosima, "I'm not really in love with the idea of Rachel snooping around here, but I don't want Professor Duncan going to the DYAD either."

"In that case, I'll arrange to have private rooms set aside at a public establishment," Marion said.

"Okay, but, like, we can't afford to have Rachel kidnap Professor Duncan or something," said Cosima.

The remark sent a ripple of unease across Professor Duncan's expression.

"I'll be in attendance with members of my staff—do you expect Rachel to whisk away Dr. Duncan under those circumstances?" Marion said. Archness turned up the corner of Marion's mouth, but her tone emerged playful, not dismissive. "Or will bearing witness in person provide the only assurance?"

The proposal seized Cosima with indecision. She glanced at Delphine. Delphine had no answer. Outside of any scientific information that might pass between them, the reunion between estranged father and daughter held no material gain or possible insight for Delphine—and should Rachel attempt a double cross, Delphine wasn't equipped to prevent or avert a ploy any better than Eric and his colleagues.

Marion addressed Professor Duncan. "You'll be afforded privacy. Within reason."

"You'll excuse me if I don't extend my thanks," Professor Duncan said, paper gripped tightly in his fingers.

Marion smiled ruefully.

"Okay, but if the body's not Jennifer and it's not Leekie, who is it?" Cosima cut in.
"Body?" Professor Duncan asked.

Marion took a breath of consideration. "It's simplest if you see yourself."

They decamped to what could only be called the morgue. A suited man occupied the room, expectant. Marion glanced at the empty gurney. "You transferred immediately to storage?"

"We didn't want the remains getting ripe, ma'am," the suit replied.

Marion nodded. "Show us, then."

The man reached for a drawer handle situated comfortably at waist height, drew out the sliding table, and unzipped the bag. Delphine heard a sharp inhalation. It had come from her.

The scar proclaimed the still face's identity.

"What happened?" Cosima asked, stepping close, eyeing the cluster of ragged blotches and punctures—the roundness suggesting bullet wounds at a glance—peppered across the chest and abdomen.

To their further surprise, the security agent sidestepped, swung open the adjacent drawer's door, and rolled out the contents. On the slab rested an identical face, unmarred, graced by a mustache, with two stains packed close on his sternum above his heart.

"He happened," Marion said, tone modulated to mild. "As far as we can determine, he tried to mount a one-man assault and rescue operation." Marion's head tilted in consideration of the waxy face. "He had some success."

Delphine glanced into Marion's face. Anger lay banked in Marion's eyes.

Delphine pitched her voice low. "There were casualties?"

"Yes," Marion said shortly.

Not Eric, though. Delphine had seen him that morning. It was his day off. Keeping her voice soft, Delphine asked, "Is Charlotte alright?"

"Yes. She wasn't on the premises," Marion said, voice quiet, eyes boring down on the lifeless supine form.

"Who are these men?" asked Professor Duncan, looking from one to the other. "Are they brothers?"

"In a manner of speaking," Marion said. "Dr. Duncan, meet Project Castor, the military-bred male branch of your project."

Professor Duncan looked up sharply. "The XY line?" He scanned the twin faces. Side by side, they looked like a before and after advertisement for any number of interests—to dissuade reckless behavior or promote scar removal or the efficient removal of facial hair. "So they cut us off and . . . continued without us."

"So it seems," Marion said. She stepped around the first body and transferred her gaze to the mustachioed face. "And trained the new group well. These two might have done more damage except that this one suffered an episode—something like a seizure. His wounds were not inflicted by my men." Marion looked to the other body of the scarred Castor. "He dealt them."

"Wait. What?" Cosima said, whirling on Marion. "You're saying that he shot his own . . . his own
brother? Why?"

"I don't know," Marion said. "Why is there a Leda hunting down other Leda?"

"Because she was brainwashed by a cult that painted us as a transgression against God," snapped Cosima. "We weren't raised together. We have as much shared history as strangers on a train."

The strain around Marion's mouth gravitated to the corners. "You're assuming the situation was different for Castor or that familiarity breeds affection—but you're likely right. My men reported that our prisoner didn't seem surprised by the seizure. Distraught, perhaps sad, but not surprised. They described what he did as a mercy kill. I've seen footage. I think they're right." She paused, contemplative. "Whatever happened, they're yours to examine. You wanted to know if they were afflicted in any way. Here's your opportunity to investigate."

Delphine and Cosima exchanged stunned glances.

"I'll return here tomorrow morning," Marion declared. "Let's say at ten? Arrangements should be in place by then." A murmur of uncertain assent provided a form of answer. Marion contemplated the waxen faces a final time. "Happy hunting."

Cosima dubbed them Scarface and Pornstache, though the notes taken that day designated them Castor Subject 1 (C1) and Castor Subject 2 (C2). No one volunteered alternatives, perhaps because none besides Cosima had any real inclination to refer directly to the dead Castor men and the twinned bodies yielded no clues as to their lost names.

Scott, who'd initially been tasked to wield the camera, ducked out early in the process, after the disrobing and the washing and right around the time Delphine drew back the flesh along the Y-incision on Scarface, looking to lose the contents of his stomach in much the same way they would root around in the contents of Scarface's exposed organ. For a time Professor Duncan hovered over the bodies in close inspection of the stripped specimens, peering into cavities, poking at the wounds and scrutinizing the men's matching tattoos. But he, too, left the morgue to Delphine and Cosima after they'd processed the majority of their external and internal inspection of Scarface, telling the two of them that he trusted they'd continue the good work.

A cursory examination seemed sufficient to determine cause of death: two in Pornstache, seven in Scarface, the bullets had done their job, pulverizing the soft tissues of muscles and organs and splintering bones to a degree of devastation Delphine had never seen in her experience. She found it hard to believe that seven bullets had been necessary to put down one man. Some had ricocheted within their target, sowing destruction throughout their path. Pornstache's remains provided a better preserved specimen, but even in his body the organs contained no polyps analogous to those that riddled the Leda strain.

"Well," Cosima said, breathing hard behind her facemask against the smell, "Marion said one of them had something like a seizure. So maybe they're suffering from something that affects the brain?"

They extracted Pornstache's brain, then Scarface's. For a long time Cosima held the mass of Scarface's gray matter in her hands, considering it from different angles. Placing it on the scale, she said, "Do you think they microchipped these guys? Like put trackers in them?"

Delphine frowned. "That's not my field, but as far as I understand, the technology to achieve something like a subcutaneous emitter that would allow that doesn't yet exist."
Cosima shrugged. "Publicly. But this is the military. If anyone's taking a crack at that technology, it's them. Hell, the DYAD probably considered trying to miniaturize the technology for us."

"You really think the Castor subjects can be tracked?"

"I'm trying to figure out how Pornstache knew where Scarface was being held."

Delphine stood quiet. "Maybe he followed them. Or, if he used technology, there could have been a chip in something else, like a phone or a watch."

Cosima's eyes crinkled, testifying to a smile behind her mask. "Have you seen a lot of spy movies, Dr. Cormier?"

Delphine gave a little shake of her head. "I would not say a lot. Probably as many as the average person."

"This just in: Delphine Cormier, average, in at least one aspect."

"I am probably average in many aspects," Delphine said, somewhat confused.

"Not average enough to not end up here," Cosima said. "Ditto for me. Though, honestly? I never really thought of myself as average—but I was still surprised when it turned out that I really wasn't average." Cosima peered into the whorls of the extracted brain. "I wonder how these two felt about being clones. Do you think they were propped up as special and exceptional?"

"I don't know," Delphine said. "I don't know how the military works." Shay had said something once, about being worn down. "Do they let soldiers be individuals? That seemed to be the goal of Project Leda."

"Well, Pornstache over there has a mustache and I don't think facial hair is in line with military regulations for appearances. So I guess they have some freedom?" Cosima sighed. "Maybe we can ask the next one."

Delphine considered Scarface. "Will you want to ask? What if the next is like this one? With that look in his eyes . . ."

"Yeah, he was a little . . . intense. But I can't imagine that they all have the same personality. I mean, a whole troop, a whole force like that? How could they be manageable?"

"Maybe they aren't."

"Yeah, but Sarah said she met another Castor among the Proletheans. Do you think if that one had the same look in his eyes that they would have taken him in?"

"I don't know anything about the Proletheans, so I can't say," Delphine said. "But if they set out to murder unsuspecting women, maybe that degree of zealotry would invite . . . that type of personality."

A furrow appeared between Cosima's brows. "I guess I don't know that much about the Proletheans, either. For all I know, maybe they like fervor." Cosima shook her head. "You know, I knew, intellectually, that cults and powerful coalitions were at play here, but it's weird to realize you're smack dab in the middle of some type of crusade war between them." Cosima huffed. "All of it used to seem weird to me and now it's——" Cosima shrugged.

Delphine stared into the cavernous maw of Pornstache's yawning ribcage. "If you could go back to
before...all of this, if the circumstances could be erased and you could have your life back the way it was before you learned about Project Leda—would you return to it?"

"That sounds more like a question for you," mused Cosima. "Theoretically, you could go back to a time before the DYAD. They don't have to be in your life. You don't have to be involved in this. It probably boiled down to, like, one or two decisions—change those and you wouldn't be standing here. Me, I'm walking this planet because they made me. My genetic makeup doesn't happen without them and so whatever embryo would have gone home with my parents from the fertility clinic wouldn't have been me. Maybe still named Cosima, but not me. That's just—that's the logistics of my situation. To go back is to just go back to ignorance, not really to a life without Leda."

Cosima was right. That their situations were not comparable. That if Delphine had said yes at this juncture or no at that offer, it was difficult to say what continent she'd be standing on, what work she would be doing, what conversation she might be having. To rescind the decision of her past self meant not currently having a gun in her glove compartment, not examining a cadaver pockmarked with bullet holes, not to feel as if a target rested on her back. To divert from the prospects at the DYAD meant not taking her bicycle onto the streets of Toronto, a driver not seeing her in time, to not hold a business card in her hand and make an appointment at the recommendation of her physical therapist.

To remove the DYAD from her past was to occlude the possibility of meeting Shay.

Cosima eyed Delphine. "Would you hit reset, knowing what you know now? You could take a hard pass on DYAD, go after some other multinational, settle down in a research hospital, or whatever else floats your boat."

Delphine blinked behind the protective eyewear. "I don't know."

Cosima lifted an eyebrow. "Really?"

"Like you said, the DYAD would exist whether I am here or not—with its workings unknown to me." Delphine paused. "It was the sense that they had knowledge I didn't have—or the keys to unlock such knowledge—that appealed to me. The not-knowing is the challenge. I can't change my curiosity. I think that if I could forget everything... I would return to the same place I started and probably make the same decisions." Delphine shrugged. "What if I'm supposed to be here?"

"You mean what if it's destiny or fate?" Cosima chuckled. "Is that something you've discussed with Shay? I've been wondering if she has any influence on you. Like, sometimes she says stuff that sounds like something you would say, but you've never sounded like her."

Delphine shook her head. "I don't know if Shay believes in fate."

"Well, do you?" countered Cosima. "That's a way more interesting question."

Maybe Shay could imagine unseen forces arranging individuals to meet regardless of reconsidered and branching choices, of splintering paths reaching across improbable geographical lengths and happenstance to eventually cross, but Delphine wasn't so sure that this wasn't the only way, the only path, the only cascade of dominoing events to land them in their exact situation.

Was that fate in some permutation?

"Do you believe in the multiverse theory?" Delphine asked.

"Aaaaaaand," droned Cosima, "she counter-proposes with a different theory to avoid answering the question!"
Delphine arched an eyebrow. "If multiple universes exist, if there are other versions of ourselves in
different circumstances—"

"There are other versions of me running around in this universe," Cosima interjected.

"—you and I," Delphine continued, undeterred, "may be friends in one of them. But if here, right
now, you say that fate dictates certain outcomes, then how can the way we exist in this universe and
the way we exist in another universe both be 'fateful' if they are contradicting scenarios?"

"Who's to say that the scenarios reach contradictory conclusions? Who says that the you and I of this
scenario can't wind up friends?"

Delphine sucked at her lips behind her mask. Aiming for lightness, she pose, "You?"

Cosima cocked her head. "Are you laying all of the blame on me?"

"No," Delphine said carefully.

"Because this situation involves two people."

Delphine nodded. "We don't have to be friends."

Cosima flapped a hand in exasperation. "See, you keep saying that. So, clearly, the current state of
affairs is not all on me."

Delphine raised her hands in surrender. "I accept my share of responsibility for our situation."

"Great," Cosima concurred. "If we can agree that we're both responsible for where we are, then we
can just as simply agree to be friends."

"Is that what you want?" Delphine asked, a note of caution slipping into her voice.

"Is it a matter of want," Cosima said, "or a decree of fate?"

"It's not fate," Delphine said.

"So Shay isn't rubbing off on you," Cosima deadpanned.

"I'm simply saying that I believe that our choices have power and consequence. If a multiverse
theory presents infinite possibilities, then in some universe I die or you die before we even get to
meet—then how could it be said that a meeting between us is fateful or prescribed by cosmic law?"

"Well," Cosima said, "what if reincarnation is a thing and so we don't have to meet in every
reincarnation cycle, but we're destined to meet across many other incarnations."

Delphine took a second to gape, though it was hidden behind the face mask. "You're inserting
reincarnation into the multiverse theory?"

Cosima spread her hands. "They're not mutually exclusive metaphysical systems."

"But earlier you—" Delphine shook her head. "Okay, no. If Shay has taught me anything, it's when
to declare a topic is done."

"Aw, c'mon," moaned Cosima.

"You are presenting a scenario of exponential headaches," Delphine said.
"What, so Shay just gives up on you when you get too uppity?"

Delphine smiled to herself, hidden by the mask. "I'm coming to see it as . . . a demonstration of wisdom."

Cosima laughed. "Wisdom? Wow. And if tomorrow Shay said that everything is ordained by fate? Would you still think she has wisdom?"

"Fate or no fate, that doesn't detract from her wisdom of knowing when to bring a spiraling situation to a close," Delphine said.

"Oh, so if Shay believes in fate, she gets a pass, but if I believe in fate, I'm a chump?"

Delphine put on an air of consideration. "Yes."

"Aw, c'mon!" protested Cosima. "Seriously?"

"Do you believe in fate?" Delphine countered.

"I am open to exploring the universe," Cosima said, spreading her arms. "I'm here to consider all possibilities of experience."

"Do the metaphysical insights come to you when you're high?" Delphine wondered.

Cosima's arms dropped to her sides. "Now I see why Shay shuts you up. But for your information—it doesn't hurt to have help opening your mind."

Delphine chuckled.

"Whatever," Cosima griped. "In some other universe, there's a Delphine who's totally chill and cool and agrees with everything I say."

"Maybe," agreed Delphine. "I'm not sure you would like her."

"What does that mean?" scoffed Cosima.

"You may get along with a Delphine like that, but I'm not sure you would find her interesting. You like mysteries and challenges. It's what makes you a driven scientist."

"Is that so?" Cosima spooned out a dose of side-eye. "Well, I've got two challenges right here and I don't like the problems they pose."

"But the pathology intrigues you, does it not?"

Cosima cocked an eyebrow at Delphine.

Delphine smiled. "It was the same for me when I was studying."

"Lucky for us," Cosima said drily. "Though I think it's pretty obvious what killed these guys."

Delphine nodded, heart sinking at the reminder. "What remains is what, if anything, might have been killing them before Marion's men did."

"What do you make of that?" Cosima asked.

"That her security has proven that they are capable?"
Cosima snorted. "I guess to a degree, yeah. Though Marion did say there were casualties—so I'm not sure how safe I really feel." Cosima brushed away the tangent with a wave of her hand. "No, I meant that these two attempted a jailbreak."

Delphine shook her head. "I did not understand how she could have kept him prisoner in her home. It didn't seem safe."

Cosima nodded. "And I got the impression that Pornstache managed to spring Scarface free—which means he successfully broke in. That doesn't bode well for us here."

Delphine nodded slowly. "You asked if the military was tracking these men—do you think these two could have tracked you or any of the others?"

"You know," Cosima drawled, "at this point I'm just going to assume everyone knows where to find me. And like I said before, there's no point dwelling on it—unless one of these guys is a genius geneticist or bioengineer, in which case I might welcome him barging in."

Delphine couldn't say if she would be as welcoming. She was also as unsure if she could adopt Cosima's professed lackadaisical mindset on the lack of privacy.

Cosima studied Scarface's features. "In some universe, I might even be one of these guys, XY instead of XX. All it would have taken was the Duncans wanting sons instead of daughters."

"Would that person still be you? The genetic makeup would likely be different along the whole genome and not just the sex chromosomes."

Cosima smirked, betrayed by the greater crinkling of one eye more than the other. "That's a good question. I mean, aren't we looking at that question now even in the case of having identical genes? Is Sarah me? Am I Rachel? If my parents have a son in another universe and they raise him exactly like they raised me, does that mean he's the de facto male version of me? All things considered, he'd probably be more like me than Alison or Jennifer are to me now—and the differences between him and me might lie more in nature than nurture."

"You think your parents would raise a son in the exact manner they raised you?" Delphine asked.

Cosima shrugged. "Probably not. They might want to raise a son and daughter in the exact same manner, let's say, for argument's sake, but I doubt societal pressures and norms would let him live day-to-day the way I did. Boys and girls just get different treatment out in the world."

Delphine stared unseeingly at the corner of the steel table.

"You're awfully quiet over there," Cosima remarked.

Delphine shook her head. "When you consider the sheer magnitude of the experiment, it's hard to see what the planners thought they would learn."

"That they could do it," Cosima said bluntly. "That they could make us and plant us in any part of the globe and that we'd still be around thirty years later to talk to anyone who needed proof of their accomplishment. Viable, genetically modified human beings will always be the first and foremost achievement of Project Leda. And if we unlock the genome, if we pry everything out of Dr. Duncan's mind, they can do it again. Except maybe next time they can start recouping the investment by letting people buy models. That's Marion's angle."

"But if on some level it is inevitable—that technology like this will advance regardless of what you or I or even the DYAD or Topside does—then what is the right course? If you cannot stop the
technology, what do you do with it? Ban it and erase it as a shame of humanity? Or go to the other extreme and ensure that it is available to anyone who wishes for it?"

"Dude." Cosima held up her hands to ward off Delphine. "Let me survive this attempt of science first, and then I can devote some headaches to figuring out those answers."

"As you've said before. At this rate, I may have to hold you to it."

"Well, you keep saying that we don't need to be friends, so if I hold you to that, how are you going to have the opportunity to hold me to my words?" Cosima shrugged. "One of those is going to have to give."

Cosima's tone wasn't harsh or challenging. Delphine smiled. "I guess we'll find out."

"How Zen. Or is that Tao? Shay probably knows."

Delphine tilted her head. "We could ask her."

"Will she tell us to shut up?" asked Cosima, raising a brow.

"Probably not, if we ask nicely."

"Oh," Cosima said brightly, "now I get it."

"What?"

"The root of Shay's wisdom." Cosima's eyes sparkled. "She knows you're an asshole."

The autopsies consumed the hours into late evening. At some point Scott ducked his head inside the morgue to check their progress, asked if they needed anything, informed them Professor Duncan was asleep, and then bade them a surreptitious and hasty good night when they assured him they were fine. Cosima floated the idea of claiming a free bed among the break room cots and keeping Professor Duncan company overnight, but Delphine offered Cosima a lift home.

By the time they hit the road the streets were mostly deserted, reducing the commute time and the degree of attention required to navigate the car, leaving Delphine's mind mostly free to contemplate the corpses they'd left packed in the morgue. Cadavers didn't unnerve Delphine. Trawling about in their innards eliminated the mystery. But the twinned forms lingered in her thoughts. Not so much the fixed rigor mortis of their mirrored features, but the shredded flesh of their fatal wounds, the bullets and shrapnel she'd removed, the men and the weapons and the cascading split-second actions and decisions that resulted in the long contemplation under the glare of harsh light.

That she had the resources to inflict such damage.

That the same could be done to her—and to those around her.

"Are you hungry?" Cosima asked. "We totally skipped dinner."

Delphine diverted her focus back onto the road.

"You're right," Delphine said after a moment. "I didn't even realize."

"Way to keep on me for my health, doc," Cosima said, with a little smirk. "I take it you're not hungry?"
"No," Delphine said. "Mostly tired."

"You didn't have to give me a ride."

"I offered," Delphine said. "It's fine. Are you hungry?"

"I've got some stuff at home I can heat up." Cosima melted into a smile skirting with laughter. "I guess the universe really doesn't want you, me, and Shay to have dinner together."

Delphine's foot drew off the accelerator a little. She hadn't answered Shay's message. The earlier predicament of indecision had fled Delphine's consciousness altogether upon Marion's arrival and the day's dovetail into a funhouse of mirrors. Was her relationship status with Shay a predicament? The issue felt less thorny in the dark of night—and that scant hours ago she'd held in her hands the hearts and lungs and brains of men who might be the vanguard of a force of lethal adversaries.

"Shay and I are together," Delphine announced without preamble.

The reply came prompt and sharp. "What?"

"Shay and I—we're . . ." Delphine squinted into the glow of distant streetlights. "Girlfriends."

Silence emanated from the other side of the cabin. A glance over revealed Cosima engaged in a study of Delphine, knuckle pressed into the corner of her mouth. "Is that the first time you've said it?"

Delphine stared ahead and summoned the wherewithal to nod. "Yes."

Cosima nodded. "Congratulations." Her tone was flat. Not derisive, nor dismissive, but subdued. Cosima turned and addressed the passenger side window. "Good for you for figuring it out. I'll make sure not to kiss her again."

Delphine replayed Cosima's words. "You won't what?" Delphine looked over. "What do you mean?"

"What do you mean what do I mean?" Cosima fired back, whipping around. "Aren't you telling me this to stake your claim?"

"No, I—you—" Delphine wrangled the competing points clamoring for clarification. "You said 'again.' What did you mean?"

"You know," Cosima said, brows clenching. "We talked about this. Remember?"

Delphine shook her head. "No?"

"No? No, I thought—" Cosima paused the thought, her mouth hanging open. "Oh. Yeah. I see."

"What?"

"I thought we talked about it," Cosima said, tone and pace measured to strive for casual, "but we must have been having two different conversations. I mean, we didn't talk about it, like, explicitly, but I thought you were referring to it because the way you were talking made it sound like you knew." Cosima's gaze cut to Delphine with caution. "I guess you didn't know."

"When was this?" Delphine asked, ascending a curious staircase of emotions that with each step compounded sentiments, ping-ponging Delphine through detached intrigue to numb shock to wild incredulity to plain blindsided confusion.
"When was what? When did I kiss Shay or when did we have the conversation that we clearly didn't have?"

Delphine shook her head. "Yes. Both."

Cosima flicked a limp hand. "It happened way back when. Before I got sick—with the flu. Not before—" Cosima's hands flapped at the air to dispel her derailing presentation. "You know what I mean. Anyway, it happened and I thought you knew about it because—" Cosima frowned. "I don't remember why exactly I got that impression. Like it was right after it happened and I think you were asking me questions that made it sound like you knew—that you and Shay had talked about it and that's why you wanted to know—" Cosima snapped her fingers. "You wanted to know how I figured out that I liked women."

"I see," Delphine said softly. Delphine thought she could pinpoint the conversation—it occurred not long ago—about as set back in history as the tentative contemplation of her feelings toward Shay. But Delphine couldn't recall the exchanges with precision, where Cosima would have construed insider knowledge that Delphine would not have forgotten.

Because Shay had never mentioned it.

"Dude, look," Cosima said, tone dwindling into tired on a sigh, "Shay wasn't into it. She made it pretty clear that—she didn't want something with me. That she was looking for something more."

Cosima turned back to the window. "I had a pretty good guess what she meant."

Delphine drove in silence. "You think it was me?"

Cosima shot Delphine a look peppered with annoyance. "Congratulations, Sherlock."

"You think so?" Delphine asked.

"Obvs!" groaned Cosima.

Delphine shook her head. "It didn't feel that way."

"Yeah, the fact that you couldn't see it was probably the problem," Cosima said, deadpan.

"No, I mean—" That Shay had hesitated. That if Shay had borne any romantic interest from a time predating Delphine's realization, Shay hadn't acted accordingly once Delphine realized her feelings inclined in that direction. At Delphine's approach, Shay had been reluctant, not excited. But what was the point trying to explain? Delphine glanced at Cosima. "Shay is an attractive woman."

Confusion crinkled Cosima's features. "Is that a question? Or a clarification? Because you already know I think she's attractive. I know I've told you that. But that's, like—I mean, I would say that's a pretty objective judgment in this case. She's cute."

"Right. She's attractive," Delphine agreed. "Sometimes I feel like she doesn't feel that way."

Cosima eyed Delphine warily. "Uh. Well. I don't know what to tell you. I mean—just as a matter of observation, mind you—I don't remember her being that shocked when I kissed her." Cosima shrugged. "She's cute."

"Right?" Delphine insisted sharply.

"You realize that you don't need to convince me?" Cosima asked.
Delphine stared into the red eye of a stoplight. "I know."

Cosima tilted her head. "Are we cool?"

Delphine's gaze touched Cosima's. "Is there a reason we shouldn't be?"

The traffic light turned green. Cosima smiled stiffly. "Damn. That's stone cold, Cormier."

Delphine eased off the brake pedal, concentrating on her responsibility as driver. "Whatever you may feel toward me, I think you like Shay and respect her—so you wouldn't interfere or act against her wishes if she's happy."

"Is she happy?" Cosima asked, tone slipping into sly.

Delphine considered her words. "I will try my best to make her happy."

Cosima smirked, then hid the expression behind her hand. "And when she's not happy?"

"I hope that I'll know—or that she'll tell me." Delphine's grip flexed on the steering wheel. "You said that you had a guess—that you could tell—what Shay felt. Why couldn't I see it?"

Cosima chuckled and shook her head.

Delphine risked stealing glances at Cosima. "What? What is it? I'm serious."

"Yeah, I know. That's what makes it funnier."

"What's funny?"

Cosima shrugged. "You may know your biology and your biochem and your pathology and whatnot, but you're going to have to study a whole lot more before you can pass a board on emotional proficiency."

"What does that mean?"

"It means that if you had trouble recognizing your own emotions when they were staring you in the face, how were you supposed to ping Shay's?"

"How did you know?"

"I didn't really know," clarified Cosima, chopping at the air. "I took an educated guess."

"What does that mean, educated guess?"

"Look," said Cosima, curt, "no gay girl wants to creep out—or creep on—her straight friends. But feelings happen, even to the most well-intentioned people."

Delphine sucked at her lips. "Was it obvious that Shay felt that way?"

Cosima gave a little shake of her head. "No, but there was, like, a vibe."

"And with me?" Delphine asked. "Was I obvious to you?"

"I don't know if you're obvious," Cosima hedged. "Sometimes you're a wall. Sometimes everything's on your sleeve. You're slippery like that. But when it comes to Shay, it tends to be the latter. From the moment we ran into her, I could tell that she meant something to you." Under her breath, Cosima
muttered, "It's why it was so easy."

"What was so easy?" Delphine asked.

Cosima glanced over sharply, then turned away with a huff that became a dark chuckle. "Getting under your skin. You didn't really care if I needled you, but you couldn't stand the thought that I would—" Cosima shrugged. "—go after Shay and, like, draw her into this or whatever."

"Is that why you kissed her?"

"No, I kissed her because she's cute and gay and turned out to be a cool person."

Silence circulated the chassis.

At last, Delphine asked, "Are you trying to get under my skin now?"

Cosima laughed, a sound with ragged edges. "I'm answering your questions! With honesty!" Cosima peered sideways in Delphine's direction. "This may surprise you but the science experiment is human with human needs. In my case, cute women."

After a time, Delphine asked, "Are you surprised about Shay and me?"

"A little bit," admitted Cosima. She propped her cheek against her fist. "I take it Shay was pretty surprised, too?"

"We're working it out," Delphine said.

Cosima smirked. "What about all the stuff with clones and conspiracies? Are you keeping it a secret?"

Delphine pulled at her lower lip. "I don't see what else I can do."

"Except text Shay all day," suggested Cosima, tone bland.

Delphine kept her eyes fixed on the road.

"'Personal business,'" Cosima scoffed. "That was actually slick. You had me going with the insinuation that it was family stuff."

"What's between Shay and me is personal business," Delphine said.

"Mhmhm, personal," Cosima echoed. "Though I guess now I know the cause of your laundry issues."

Delphine didn't dignify Cosima's suspicions with a response.

"Leave clothes at her place," Cosima said. "It'll make your life easier." Cosima grinned to herself. "It'll make my life easier, too, if you're hanging at her place all the time. Good to know."

Delphine wasn't sure she agreed, but she couldn't deny the modicum of relief in relinquishing at least one secret among the many she now hoarded.

* 

It issued no louder than a scratch at Shay's door, but her body tensed, senses that had been receding and filtering out night noise reversing course and listening for any sign that someone might be
tampering with the door handle or lock. Shay held her breath. Maybe her mind was creating phantom sounds. Maybe it was—her mind recoiled a little—a mouse. (What might she have left open to entice a mouse?)

The sound repeated and her senses, more alert and receptive, discerned a series of taps, the softest of enquiries.

Who would be at her door at this hour, batting at it so feebly and hesitantly?

One possibility made Shay abandon her bed and reach for her robe. Could it be Cosima? Sick and weakened?

A peek through the glass panel revealed no one in the soft light of the hall. But if Cosima had come down in distress, she could have collapsed. Shay opened the door and glanced out.

Delphine, off to the side of the door, back pressed to the wall, gaped at Shay.

Shay released a tense breath and smiled in relief. "Hey."

"Did I wake you?" Delphine asked, faintly distressed and somewhat confused.

"No, I was—falling asleep."

Delphine's brow bore confusion. "Does it take you that long to fall asleep?"

"No, I just closed my eyes a few minutes ago. I was reading before bed and lost track of time."

"I'm sorry," Delphine said.

Shay reached for Delphine's hand. "Don't worry about it. Did you bring Cosima home? Did you leave work that late?"

"Yes," Delphine said, hand reluctant in Shay's. "I really thought you were asleep."

"Do you want to stay here tonight?" asked Shay, ignoring Delphine's return to apologetic. "So you don't have to drive home."

"Are you sure?"

"Yes," Shay said, gently tugging Delphine inside.

"May I shower first?" Delphine asked softly. "I very much need to wash."

"Of course." Shay smiled and halted to draw Delphine down into a quick kiss. "Hey."

Delphine smiled. "Bonsoir."

Shay put a fresh towel into Delphine's hands and, while Delphine headed to the bathroom, Shay slipped back into bed. By the time the mattress dipped and a cloud of floral and fruity scents enveloped her, Shay had descended to the fuzzy precipice of sleep. An arm slipped over Shay's waist as Delphine pressed close against Shay's back, lips finding an exposed sliver of shoulder. Shay smiled.

About a minute later, Delphine said, "I told Cosima about us."

Shay paddled toward the surface of consciousness. "Mm, yeah? How'd it go? Was it okay?"
"Yes," Delphine said. She pressed her lips to Shay's shoulder again, her breath warm on Shay's skin. "She told me that she kissed you."

Shay's pulse quickened—with surprise. Not guilt, not fear, perhaps because of the way Delphine delivered the revelation, softly, as if the act of vocalization doubled as exploration of the fact. Shay reached for Delphine's hand and threaded her fingers through Delphine's. "She did. Once. She caught me by surprise."

"Me, too," Delphine murmured.

"Cosima tried to kiss you, too?" Shay asked, awareness rising a tick.

Laughter vibrated against Shay, Delphine's exhalations low and quiet. "No, I meant that she surprised me when she said it." Delphine rubbed the tip of her nose over the juncture of Shay's neck and shoulder. "She thought I knew. She thought you had told me."

Shay opened her eyes, fighting against the stickiness of heaviness upon her eyelids, and shifted slightly. "Are you wondering why I didn't tell you?"

"A little bit," Delphine whispered.

Shay filled her lungs and exhaled sharply, oxygenating her mental faculties into operational capacity. "I didn't tell you because this was before anything—romantic—happened between you and me and nothing happened between me and Cosima. It was embarrassing more than anything."

"How is your relationship with Cosima now?"

"Fine." Shay squeezed Delphine's hand. "We talked about it. We're okay being friends."

Delphine's lips pressed contemplatively to Shay's shoulder. "I trust you."

Shay processed the statement. "You don't trust Cosima?"

"I can understand why she kissed you," Delphine said.

Shay giggled. "You're sweet. But I think . . ." Shay paused to arrange her thoughts. "Well, I think Cosima is okay with casual relationships, for one, and that . . . she was lonely. And maybe scared. About being sick. I didn't know that she was sick at the time, but it made a lot of sense after I found out."

Delphine nodded against Shay. "I see."

Shay stroked Delphine's hand with her thumb. "Are you okay?"

Delphine exhaled in a heavy gust of breath that sent strands of hair tickling Shay's neck. "Should I be jealous?"

"No," Shay said. "I care about Cosima as a friend and I think—I think she really needs friends right now."

Delphine nodded, a motion that translated as a nudge against Shay's shoulder. "Yes. I think so, too. And I know you are a good friend."

Shay smiled to herself and jostled Delphine's hand in hers. "Thanks."

Delphine was quiet for a time. Shay assumed she was falling asleep, much as Shay was, but
Delphine sounded awake when she said, "Sometimes I feel . . . that it's now more difficult to talk to you."

Shay jerked toward Delphine but remained lying on her side. "You do?"

"Sometimes I . . . I think a long time about what I want to say to you. As if I need to find . . . a right way to say something. Before it was easy. I thought of something and I said it." Delphine's clutch tightened. "But I think it's because the things I want to ask you now are different. They feel harder to address."

Shay turned and shifted onto her back to peer at Delphine in the twilight. "I don't want you to feel that way. You can talk to me. About whatever you need to."

Delphine propped her head up on her free hand. "Are you happy?"

"Right now?" Shay asked with a little smile. "I'm a little worried."

Delphine didn't smile but contemplated Shay in the dimness. "Do you feel forced to be with me? Because—because I was so insistent?"

"Delphine," Shay said softly, tone matching Delphine's somberness, "if I felt that I only wanted to be friends with you, if I felt that you and I wanted different things from each other, I would have told you that, like I told Cosima." Shay sighed. "I mean, yes, I was afraid—I am afraid—that we'll end up wanting different things. That maybe you'll realize you don't want to be with a woman, or you don't want to be with someone like me, that you need someone more like you, or that you want something else, something that being with me will hold you back from. All those things scare me because—" Shay touched Delphine's chin and took a breath to quash her pounding heart. "—I want to be with you. Like this."

Even in the near darkness, Delphine's gaze pierced deep in scrutiny. "Did I push too hard? Did you need more time?"

Shay stroked Delphine's cheek with the back of her hand. "Where is this coming from? Did something happen?"

Delphine gave a minute shake of her head. "I've . . . had a lot of time to think. There's a lot of waiting between tests."

"Yeah? What were you thinking about?"

"That maybe I was too focused on my goal. That maybe I didn't . . . pay enough attention to you or what you wanted. That maybe my behavior made you afraid to tell me that."

Shay couldn't help it. She smiled. "With so many questions to mull on, do you even have time to do work?"

But Delphine looked uncertain, even sad.

"Okay," Shay said softly. "Can I ask what made you question yourself like this?"

"On Saturday—in the morning—you were so quiet," Delphine said. "I thought maybe . . . maybe you were having second thoughts."

"That was a few days ago," Shay said. "You didn't say anything."
"Because when I saw you later that night, you seemed better. More . . . energetic." Delphine paused. "Happier." Delphine sucked at her lips. "And—I didn't know if I should ask." Delphine shook her head again. "I didn't want to ask."

"Why?"

Delphine held Shay's gaze. "Because if you'd thought about it and realized that . . . being with me wasn't what you thought it would be like, or that you didn't like it, I wasn't ready . . . to hear you say that."

"And now you're ready?"

"No," Delphine whispered. "But I'm tired of thinking about how I want to talk to you about these things and then stopping myself from doing it. Because you're the one I want to talk to. All the time." Delphine exhaled sharply. "But I keep thinking about what you might say or think if I ask certain questions or raise certain topics. Everything feels . . . fragile when we're apart. Then I see you and . . . I forget what I was worrying about. But then I'll have time to think again and I start to wonder . . ."

"I thought it was my job to think too much in this relationship," Shay remarked gently, prodding at the corner of Delphine's mouth with a knuckle, as if she could coax a smile.

"The possibility occurred to me that I wasn't thinking enough," Delphine said.

Shay smiled. "Maybe not talking enough. But you're not the only one." Shay traced the line of Delphine's jaw. "What did you mean by—what did you say—that being with you wasn't what I thought it would be like?"

"Sex with me," Delphine said. "For example."

Shay's lips parted soundlessly, then spread into a grin against a reflex of laughter. "Are we just exchanging worries?" She shook her head and hastened to add, "Sorry, sorry, I'm not teasing you. It's just that—you know I was worried about whether you would like having sex with me, and now that we've been together, it's funny that—" Shay shook her head. "I told you, I like being with you, the sex included. Delphine, you are so much more . . . attentive and passionate than—than a lot of people I've known." Shay swallowed. "And sometimes it feels like . . . too much. Not because I think you're being too much, because I—I love seeing you like this. I love learning more about you and the person you are and all the depths I haven't seen yet. It was just hard to accept that all this intensity and passion were . . . because of me."

"Why is that hard to accept?" Delphine asked. "This I have definitely told you, that you are wonderful and beautiful and—that you've given me so much."

Shay felt the heat in her cheeks. "Yes, you have. But it's hard to accept because if I believe you—if I believe that you say those things because—" Shay pressed her hand against Delphine's sternum, above Delphine's heart. "—of what you feel, then I have to look at what that makes me feel. And it's—it's the titration thing. It's acknowledging . . . how much I feel."

"You're afraid of your feelings?" Delphine asked in a whisper.

Shay exhaled tremulously. "A little bit."

The scant amount of illumination didn't conceal the glimmer of confusion in Delphine's eyes.

Shay smiled because it hit her in a flash. "Does that sound strange to you? Is it weird to imagine not charging at everything at one hundred percent? Because for me, one hundred percent . . . can feel
like fifty percent out of my control and that fifty percent feels like being in freefall, with no idea which way is up and which way is down or where you're being taken. And that's only my half of the equation, without adding you."

Delphine's features relaxed and Shay could see her withdrawing inward.

"Does that make sense?" Shay prompted when Delphine didn't reply.

With a note of surprise, Delphine said, "Yes." After a moment, Delphine added, "I'm sorry. I should have asked sooner."

Shay applied gentle pressure against Delphine's sternum. "Delphine . . . you were really intense, yeah, but you always gave me my space. I haven't done anything I didn't want to do, if that's what you're worried about. And maybe if you hadn't been intense . . . maybe I wouldn't have made any decision. Maybe I would have been too scared to do anything with you—because I was too scared to lose you . . . or too scared to lose myself."

Delphine freed her hand from Shay's and covered Shay's other hand over her heart. "Are you happy?"

"I . . . I'm trying to let myself be happy, without restrictions," Shay said. "It's . . . it's not always easy."

Delphine clutched Shay's hand. She raised Shay's hand to her lips and pressed a kiss to the palm of Shay's hand. "I understand."

"Are you happy?" Shay asked.

"When I'm with you, yes," Delphine said. "More than anywhere else." She leaned over and rested her forehead against Shay's. "You can believe that."

Shay smiled. "I do have a complaint."

"What is it?"

"Knocking on my door like that late at night is super creepy."

"I'm sorry. I thought you were asleep and didn't want to wake you."

"Then why did you knock?"

"Wishful thinking. Why did you answer?"

"I thought maybe it was Cosima, sick again."

Delphine was quiet. "You're a good person." Her eyes looked troubled. "You shouldn't have answered the door. It could have been a thief or someone who wanted to harm you."

Shay smiled. "But it was you. And I assume you don't want to hurt me."

"This time."

"This time you don't want to hurt me?" Shay teased. "Next time it could be Cosima needing help again."

Delphine sighed. "I don't have a good counter argument to that. Because it's possible."
Shay smiled. "I think it's more possible than someone coming to hurt me."

"But in that case it would only take being wrong once."

Shay giggled. "Thanks, Dad."

Delphine recoiled with a jerk. "Is that what your father tells you?"

"Well, you know, 'watch out for sleazy men,' 'don't park next to vans,' 'check the backseat of your car.'"

Delphine shook her head. "My father never gave me such advice."

"Maybe those are American concerns. What kind of advice did your dad give you?"

"Work hard, have confidence in myself, meet the right people, invest well."

Shay erupted in muted giggles, which turned into a yawn, through which she said, "I feel like that explains a lot."

"And there's the sign that I've kept you up too long," Delphine said.

"Mmm," grumbled Shay.

Delphine pressed a kiss to Shay's forehead. "We can talk more tomorrow."

"Mmm, yes," Shay said, closing her eyes. "Don't be afraid to talk to me."

"I want you to feel the same toward me."

Shay stiffened, eyes cracking open, then gasped a chuckle. "Touché."

"That was not a challenge," Delphine said, wrapping Shay up in her embrace. "It would make me happy to be your sounding board."

"Is that right?" Shay muttered, tucking in against Delphine. "You want to listen to me debate the merits of different crystals and incense and essential oils, or break down the forms of meditation?"

"If you want to talk about them, yes."

"You'd hate it," Shay said.

"I'd listen."

Shay giggled. "And hate it."

"Shhh, good night," Delphine urged in a whisper. "But I'll tell you a secret: I'm not sure I would hate it—and I cannot imagine anyone else who would make me think that."

Shay smiled to herself. "Good night."

Delphine's hold tightened. "Fais de beaux rêves, ma chérie."

Warm, secure, the weight of Delphine beside her like an anchor, that night Shay did.
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