

# *Sisters*



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*A tale from Turaset*



## CHAPTER ONE

Celeste pushed through the crowds, swells of rain hitting her shoulders and sending a chill into her chest. She clutched her satchel beneath her coat. At least the books were dry, but the drops hitting her felt like blades of ice. Like they'd peel the skin straight off her face.

These storms were nothing like the gentle showers she knew back home. Nothing like spring cloudbursts that coaxed country hillsides into another season of wildflowers. No, these sea-storms felt every bit as opinionated as Naron City itself.

Hooded blurs of passing faces seemed to accept it all, and ahead, squares of light from the dormitories lined up in pick-pocked rows. She'd be dry enough soon.

Once in her room Celeste shuddered out of her coat, gave it a massive shake and hung it next to the radiator. She grabbed a towel and roughed her hair.

"You should've skipped."

Celeste's roommate Nora didn't even look up from her latest racy softback. From the entangled couple on the cover, the way Nora's eyes were glued to the pages, it was easy to imagine why.

Celeste shucked off her shoes, dropped to her bed and peeled off her socks. Her toes had pruned into wrinkled lumps, and, grimacing, she rubbed at them with the towel.

Nora's toes, plump and pink, scrunched her sheets. She looked warm. But even with the rain, Celeste wouldn't have skipped class. "You missed a great lesson. We calculated how to break a theoretical

sphere into pieces and make two new ones out of the parts. I couldn't stop laughing. The math works!"

Nora turned a page in her softback. "Spheres. Wow, wish I'd been."

"Anson said if Turaset was the size of a handball, it'd be the smoothest handball in the world."

"Mmm."

Celeste threw one of her socks at Nora. "I'm getting you to class tomorrow. Rain's no excuse."

Calculus was required in City Study, the two-year university program for country youth. Joining the program wasn't how Celeste expected to come to Narona, but here she was, at last. She'd begged her parents to let her to move to one of the cities—any of them—as soon as she turned sixteen two years earlier.

She remembered her first argument.

"I'm old enough to marry. If that happens, I'll be stuck."

"No," Papa Hubert had said.

"Hubert," she'd cried, "please!"

Fiercely, he'd said, "It's not safe. Not for a family like ours."

She'd steamed at that. Their family was no different than anyone else's. "That's no excuse, *Papa*."

He snapped, "You'll address me by name."

"You're treating me like a baby. If I'm old enough to call you by name, *Papa*, I'm old enough to leave."

Celeste had tried to pull her mama, Ethyl, into the argument. Ethyl had once said the best choice she had ever made was moving to Collimais; that if she'd never moved, she wouldn't know a single thing past the town where she grew up.

But Ethyl avoided these discussions, and every time Celeste brought it up, Hubert's answer was no. Cities were unsafe, he said. Their family needed to be as far from them as possible, he said. And they were expensive—he said that too. And filthy.

As if the horses weren't filthy. Or the inn, filthy with age from its dusty entry to its dreary root cellar to every last guest room above.

Celeste tolerated it, endured sleepy Collimais. She left little notes to herself, scraps written in a miniscule little script and tucked into tiny cracks in windowsills or under seat cushions, reminding herself that this tedious, chore-laden life wouldn't last forever.

The scribbles grew more elaborate by the month, and as bits of paper began to fill every available cranny, a funny thing happened. The notes began to convince her that the cities were the exact opposite to what Hubert claimed. She saw them as her wide-open future. She came to believe it, and with that she began approaching guests.

"I'd love to work in Vastol," she said to a couple from the capital city one morning.

The woman said, "Maybe not a good idea. It's mostly drudge work for young people."

Celeste held up her oven mitts.

"No, no, worse. Assembly lines, long shifts, like that. Unless you've a certificate?"

Hubert came over and took her by the elbow. "Excuse my daughter."

But the notion wouldn't leave her head. City folk stayed under *this* roof, slept under sheets she herself had washed and enjoyed food she'd prepared. There must be a way to flip things. She cornered guest after guest, teasing nuggets from them about their homes. How to get there, how to find a job or survive without one. How to leave Collimais.

And then one spring morning she woke, and the sky was that rarest shade of paradise blue, and Celeste was certain, absolutely certain, that everything would line up. On that day, that morning, over a plate of maple syrup muffins drizzled with heavy cream, one of the guests blew the entire thing completely, utterly, and forever wide open.

He said. That guest—he did! He said. (Celeste couldn't believe her ears.)

He said Celeste might *enroll* in Naron's Central University. At. No. Cost.

He said a new program sought students from foothill villages and offered education, lodging—even a weekly allowance.

She looked at the man with her jaw somewhere around her ankles.  
“Free lodging?”

“Yes, and meals.”

“So it wouldn’t be too expensive,” she said, surprised at the calm restraint in her voice.

At the head of the table Hubert sat stonily silent.

“She’d be supervised,” the man said in his clipped city accent. “It’s quite safe. She’d live in a dormitory with other foothill women.”

Hubert didn’t say a word. He faced the man straight-on, and his hair fell over his eyes like a hand of refusal.

“Why?” Celeste said to the man. “Why are they doing this?”

“Better relations throughout Nasoir. Our city councils want closer ties with the foothills, and Naronia—my home city—decided on this program. It’s meant to improve cultural understanding.”

“Improve commerce, more likely,” Hubert said in a surly voice, the word ‘no’ threatening to fall.

“I promise, Mr. de Hub, understanding. Just as this conversation aids my understanding of your concerns; just as this inn builds something of an intersection between different people and cultures. The program is called City Study. Naronia City would welcome your daughter.”

Celeste didn’t dare speak. Whatever bizarre set of blessings had kept her voice calm had surely fled by now. Her mama Ethyl, however, seemed oddly intent. Her eyes a bit brighter and a tightness in her lips, like something was in there, and she needed a moment to let it grow. “Hubert. They’re offering free schooling.”

Celeste’s eyes flew wide and her thoughts streamed out in an unbroken river of words. “Education! Hubert. They teach mathematics, and science, and literature and philosophy, and they have libraries—entire buildings with books, and they have scholars, and thinkers. Our schoolhouse is barely big enough for anything. But if they want me to learn all *that*, don’t you see? I could bring that here. Hubert please.”

“No!” he exploded. “Not in a city, and not for two years.”

“*Only* two years. Only two.”

At that, Celeste's sister Ardelle piped up from across the table. "I want to go too."

"No," Celeste said. "You're too little."

"I'm fifteen!"

The guest started laughing, telling Ardelle the program was only for those eighteen and older. "Please consider it, Mr. de Hub. Your daughter Celeste makes a good point, and her enthusiasm is plain. She'd bring back whatever she learns of writing, reading, civics. All of it comes back to Collimais, and she'd share what she learns, perhaps teach at your schoolhouse."

Hubert said to the man, "Why are you so set on this?"

"I'm a teacher myself, sir. In fact, I'll be organizing classes for the program."

Ethyl looked directly at Hubert. "He's been a perfect guest."

Hubert stared at Ethyl. So did Celeste, with overflowing gratitude. Hubert nodded at last.

The guest beamed. "You'll be glad. Naroná's teachers are the finest on the coast."



When Celeste arrived in Naroná in mid-summer, she found it wasn't the size of Naroná City that was impressive, but the height. One would need to see Naroná end to end to have a sense of the size of it, and Naroná couldn't be seen end to end, not like that, not from anywhere, because it kept wrapping itself around the seacoast with little fingers of brick and fencing and paving. Naroná went inland, north, and south. Seeing more than one teeny bit of it was impossible.

But it was certainly tall. Each building was three stories at least and more often five or six. Naroná was tall, the sidewalks paved and hard, and the air stank like bad eggs when the wind blew from the south. Her roommate Nora said the smell came from the geothermal fissures outside the city.

And besides tall, Naroná City was easy. There was electric heat in the dormitory, and electric lights, and an electric cooktop for the

women to share. Celeste and Nora could even heat a pot of water in their room.

The men's dormitory was two buildings down, and there was a communal cafeteria between.

The best part of the program, though, was the classes. The textbooks had been neatly stacked on her desk when she arrived. Shiny, fat textbooks. Nothing like the worn, handed-down primers back in Collimais—these were new, and she had one for Calculus, and Leadership Studies, and Art History.

That first evening, Celeste settled into the corner of her bed and cracked one open. The smell of glue and ink came from the pages and she grinned, then flipped to the first chapter and lost herself tracing the history of pigments through the decades.

A sub-discipline of painting called fiber art creativism didn't use paint at all, but natural substances. Petals and bark to form meaning, the book said. A rising creativist, Jol Pejulise, used fiber art to send populist messages, and sometimes Pejulise went into hiding when her messages grew too inflammatory. One of her larger canvases, shown in a two-page spread in the middle of the textbook, had been pounded around the edges with heavy rocks and an explosion of water-worn pebbles were strewn across the center over bruised flower buds.

*Oppression*, the caption read.

Celeste sat back. "Wow."

"Wow?" Nora was picking through a handful of new cosmetics.

"They use twigs and leaves to make art."

"Cheaper, I guess."

"The stuff that gets in our hair and under our nails. Nora, she uses dirt."

"Honey, I'm not in class."

Reading this book hardly felt like class, but she closed it and pushed off her bed.

"Here's what I think." Nora dabbed gloss on her lips. "There's only so much we can learn in class. But there's a whole world to learn out there." She handed Celeste a tin of colored eye slips. "Put a new color in."

She'd never worn eye slips before; she'd only heard about them. She'd never had a finger in her eye either, except once when wrestling Ardelle. But she tried the brown slips, and Nora was right, the color made her eyes deeper, more sophisticated somehow, and her hair seemed a lighter with her eyes so dark.

It felt daring. It felt right.

They went out and came across a used book store, tucked in amongst a few other shops. The books in the window sucked her in and Nora followed. Many of the spines were worn—but that smell. Musty and good. She wandered down an aisle and paged through a hardback titled *'Tales of the Abyss.'* The book was filled with sailing legends from the Singing Sea. She lost herself in a story about the okeafolk, mythical beings from the depths, when Nora grabbed her and pulled her to the back.

"Look!"

The covers on the softbacks were all bare skin and muscled bodies.

"Can you imagine books like these in the foothills?" Nora whispered, holding one open.

Celeste snatched the softback and shoved it back onto the shelf. "No. We don't have books like that. We don't *need* books like that. We have the real thing, Nora."

"Do you want to buy it?" Nora said in an undertone, pulling the softback off the shelf again.

"No, I do not!" But watching Nora, her eyes flitting back and forth across the page, she broke into laughter. "You buy it."

"Oh, I plan to, honey."



"Living out in the country would be easy, penny pie. Foothillers don't work. Not for anything."

Celeste couldn't look at the city girl—could barely stand to listen. The instructor didn't step in; she never stepped in during these so-



called debates; she said the whole point of Leadership Studies was for the students to bridge their differences.

So, choosing her words carefully, Celeste said, “Of course we work. Hard. We might work to learn the family business, or we might apprentice out, but either way it’s an education, and it’s work, like this. It’s equal to the city, and it’s fair. It’s work, and it’s the same.”

“It’s not the same at all,” the girl snapped. “Your grades won’t matter. You don’t have to build a career. You can lay back and relax and wait for your parents to die.”

Celeste gasped. More hotly, she said, “I could build my own career. I could teach. After City Study, I could be a schoolteacher back home.” A few students snickered.

Nora spoke up. “I refuse to take my mama’s business.”

“The point is you could,” the girl said.

“The *point*,” Nora said, “is it’s harder for us to find a new career.”

Celeste lay awake that night, turning the debate over. Leadership Studies had nothing to do with leading anything. The instructor said an ‘idea chasm’ lay between the cities and the foothills, and that the students needed to cross the divide and talk with one another openly.

But Calculus had none of that. Calculus was all about numbers and theory. Most importantly, it meant time with Anson. He’d grown up on the bluffs overlooking the Singing Sea, and one of the students had asked him once if he could see the whole city from his parents’ house. He’d said no, but that half the city wasn’t worth seeing anyway.

That little comment had lodged into her thoughts. She wondered if he’d ever show her the other half.

Slim and graceful Anson, who moved like a dancer, whose presence slipped into her awareness like a song from another room. His eyes were like a lake under the evening sky, halfway between blue and gray, and he smiled whenever she walked by. His accent thrilled her like a finger trailing up her spine.

Celeste always blushed around Anson.

Within a week of meeting him, she found herself idly writing ‘Celeste de Ans’ in the margin of her calculus notebook. Then crossing that out, she’d write Anson Voncele.

One day he stopped next to her desk while she was doodling extra flourishes on the ‘s’s.’

She *felt* him, his eyes, on her doodles.

“Oh, I like the second version.”

She slammed the notebook shut and thrust it under the Calculus text, and, warmer by the second, she pinched her mouth and stared down. She waited for him to leave, to walk on so she might die in peace, but his shoes stayed right there, next to her desk.

Unmoving.

After a moment she dared a glance. A smile had settled onto his face, warm and soft and completely directed at her. He took the desk next to her.

After class (to which she could pay no mind at all for the thumping in her chest), he asked her to dinner.

No. No! She shook her head furiously and left.

No foothill boy would be so bold, asking a girl out in the middle of a group like that, as if they’d met already. As if they knew one another. Of course, if she’d been in the foothills she wouldn’t have been doodling his name in the middle of class. She’d’ve been hanging sheets or tending horses or checking guests into their rooms.

But when she lay awake, unable to sleep, she turned that over too. And later that week, when the nasty girl in Leadership Studies spouted scat about marriages in the foothills being some sort of barbaric holdover, when she said foothillers never dated, wouldn’t know how to date, and that city girls were more sophisticated, Celeste discovered a pool of resolve within herself. She worked up her nerve, and later, in Calculus, *she* sat next to *him*. As soon as Calculus ended, with the image of that rude girl still in mind, she said, “Anson, would you have dinner with me?”

A foothill girl would never be so forward, yet here she was, downright citified. This was why she’d left Collimais after all, to be more than the foothill girl she’d been.

He smiled, right at her, into her eyes, and his own crinkled and closed a bit, like he savored the question.

“Yes.”

“Yes? Yes!” Laughter bubbled out of her. “All right. I trust I wasn’t too forward.” A small part of her watched in stunned silence as this new Celeste so assuredly said these bizarre words.

“Not forward at all. How about the food hall?”

They walked to the cafeteria, and all along the way her heart lodged into her throat, keeping her from uttering a single coherent syllable. But he was kind, and attentive through the meal when she told him of her family and the inn, and later, she relived each moment and every sentence of the evening. How he’d push his hair back from his forehead, or lean closer to catch her words because she seemed to keep swallowing them, or how he laughed—and his eyes would close a little bit, as if whatever she’d said was as delicious as the roast scallops and potatoes.

He asked her out next. She said yes.

After a few weeks Nora remarked, “You’re spending so much time together, I’ll soon have the room to myself.”

“Nora! I’m not like the girls in your softbacks.”

“Honey, aren’t we all like the girls in my softbacks? You know,” she said, tossing one from her growing stack over to Celeste’s bed, “at least a little?”

By early spring, Celeste and Anson were spending nights together. “See?”

“It’s not like that. We’re a pair, that’s all. He says it like that, and he’s right.”

“Oho, a pair, that’s the word now?”

“Listen. Last term, in Leadership Studies the instructor said to make the most of the program. That’s all I’m doing. Anson says kissing me is like kissing the foothills. He *says* that. He says it’s my hair, because it’s long, like he always pictured, and he says it smells like the country. Isn’t that funny? He says my hair smells like the foothills.”

Whenever he spoke like that, his gaze would fall, boyish and endearing, with his eyes half closed, lips barely parted, like she was a wonder to him. She sighed happily, and said to Nora, “But we haven’t done the unnatural things in your books.”

“Okay, hon, just be careful. City boys, mm. They’re not like foothill suitors. They aren’t matches either. They treat girls the way they treat job prospects—cast wide, cast often. Don’t lose your heart.”

Celeste laughed, because giving her heart up so completely had been the best part. Being his. Every time he looked at her, or smiled or spoke in his city way, she knew he felt the same. “Just wait, Nora, you’ll see. How does the song go? *With love, the words don’t matter—*”

“Love? Oh hon. Doubt he sees it that way. He’s trying you out.”

No. If that was true, he wouldn’t have been so patient waiting for her.

Celeste had not been a virgin with Anson—she’d been as curious as the next teenager in the foothills. There’d been a boy or two in the hayloft. No, she hadn’t been a virgin, but she’d never *loved* a man, not like that, and she asked Anson to wait, because she wanted their first time to be more than a tumble.

Anson, to her surprise, had been a virgin. He’d been nervous that night, fumbling with his trousers while she held back her own nervous giggles. His touch, his kisses, tentative, then demanding, his body against hers, like he wanted every piece of her. A shiver ran through her remembering how her heart had flown open. She sighed happily. “When we’re together, Nora, it’s perfect. I’ve grown. I’m a woman. Truly.”

Nora shrugged. “Okay.”

“Listen! I chose this. *I* did, not my parents. Anson didn’t court me—I asked *him* out. And we waited for each other. Your books don’t describe it right. Being with him is like throwing myself into the ocean. And I chose it.”

Nora shook her head and stuck her nose back into her book.

The months passed, and her happiness grew. Anson. Some nights, the warm ones, they’d walk hand in hand down to the docks, find a food vendor and weave sea grass into bracelets or watch small creatures sparkle to life under the waves. Other nights they stayed in his room, studying.

*Bliss*, she thought. *I’ve found bliss*. Ethyl had never told her that love could feel this way, and she wondered about that, why her parents

never wore the smiles she and Anson so often did, but this feeling! She'd happily spend a lifetime with a man who could make this magic. Lighter-than-air, floating-on-a-breeze tenderness. Fullness.

Happiness.

One morning, during the hottest month of summer, Anson told her he'd be travelling with his parents to vacation on the southern isles. They owned a bungalow, he said, and were going to get away from the sultry, smelly city.

"Take me," she begged.

"What, to meet my family?"

They lay in his bed, and he brushed stray hairs from her eyes. Even his fingers were those of a dancer, the way they lilted down her cheeks. "They'd bore you, Celie. They're old thinkers. I know you. You grab life. You're a revolutionary."

She smiled at that, because she really was. "They're new to me. And the islands? When will I have the chance to go otherwise? Please, Anson." She placed her hand on his bare stomach and ran it around to his back, pulled closer to him and dropped her voice, "Think of the beach... the waves on the sand. And us." She nuzzled up toward his ear, where the scent of him, in the crook of his neck, excited her most.

He roused, pulling her closer, and whispered. "I want to. Autore, that would be fantastic."

"Then do," she murmured, nibbling his earlobe. "The beach. You. And me."

He groaned and fell back onto his pillow. "I can't. They wouldn't understand. They have expectations of me, and you'd be horrified by them. Their ideas about business and marriage." His voice had gone matter-of-fact.

She pushed onto her elbow. "What are you saying? It sounds like they'd disapprove of me because I'm a foothiller."

"No! No, they wouldn't understand is what I'm saying."

"So we make them understand."

He glanced at her, and for the first time his half-lidded eyes felt gauging.

“We make them understand, Anson. We’ve been together half a year, and it’s past time I met your parents. We *make* them understand.”

“Celie. Don’t ask, I’m begging you. Give me time to explain, speak with them about it. I’ll soften them up. Celie, sweet country girl. You know I’d take you if I could, but it’s only a few weeks.” He pulled her close again and kissed her. Maybe to end the conversation, that’s how it felt, but she sank back into his arms.

## CHAPTER TWO

Summer in Naron. Oppressive and rank. The morning suns blasted the buildings, the bricks seemed to quiver from it, to fall into themselves and line up in slumping rows. And then, after those bricks had soaked up all that energy, heat rolled back out of them for the rest of the day.

Celeste endured. In lifeless monotony she survived stench, sweat, and the absence of Anson. She stayed in the dormitory, sweltering in the room with the window wide.

One morning, she shoved all the stacks of softbacks out of the way, spread a towel in the middle of the room and dribbled water on her shoulders and stomach. “He’s on an island, Nora. An island with breezes and waves at his feet. Cold waves. He’s probably sipping bristlepod juice this very minute. He’s there, and I’m *here*. I want to be with him!” She closed her eyes and saw Anson, lounging on an island paradise. Anson—wrapped in the gentle scent of coral vine, smiling languidly. Anson! Vacationing in the southern seas!

The walls sagged.

Nora muttered at last, “Let’s go to the pier. There’s a beach there, right?”

Celeste peeled her hair off her cheeks. “Too crowded.”

Nora exhaled loudly. “The northern shore then.”

“Too far.”

“Stop whining!”

“You know, eighteen months ago, I would’ve given my right arm to be here. Even if you told me it was an oven, I’d’ve given both arms to be here, with shops right outside my door.”

“Shops,” Nora mumbled, fanning herself with a book.

“We’re nineteen, in the best city in the world. But it’s so hot.”

Another humid, dull-air minute passed. “Haircuts.”

It took a moment for the word to sink in. Haircuts. Yes—this sweaty, heavy hair sliced straight off. “City style?”

“City style.”



When the day came for Anson to return, Celeste woke singing. She fluffed her newly-shorn hair, colored her cheeks and lined her lips. She leaned over Nora and whispered, “I’m seeing Anson today.”

“Eager much?” Nora mumbled, not even opening her eyes. “Make him find you.”

“No. It’s been weeks. I’m hungry.”

Nora rolled over and kicked her sheet off. “You’re making this wa-a-a-ay too easy for him.”

“Stop! He’s my lover.” She savored the word, drew it out, felt the rightness of it. She was a fully-grown woman, here in a thriving city.

She ran up the steps to Anson’s room. His door was unlocked, and she pushed it open and there he was, all slim, a little darker, unpacking and facing away. Seeing him, so gracefully moving his things out of the baggage case, so unlike anyone she’d known before, she ached at it. Like silk. His movements were silk. She stood in the doorway and sighed in a small moaning way.

“Hey!” he said, crossing the room to embrace her. “Country girl.” Then he laughed and said, “City girl!” He ran his fingers through her hair. “Look at you, stylish girl. *My* girl.”

It fell like music on her ears.

“Anson,” she breathed. His. The world was solid. His skin was soft and warm, his breath was his breath, on her face with a faint scent of mint. “I missed you.”

The sex was rough, and afterward he pushed up and looked at her in his gentlest way. She brushed his hair out of his eyes, tucked locks behind his ears.

“Celie,” he said with a smile. “I come back and here you are, waiting for me.”

She ran a finger down his shoulder. “Did you ask them?”



“Ask them what?”

She laughed. “About me. Meeting me.”

“Meeting you? Of course not.”

She pulled back, still.

“I told you, Celeste, they’re old-fashioned. I need to soften them up.”

“You’ll take me next time, of course.”

He laughed, low and sexy, and she found she still wanted him. He said, “Trust me, you would not fit in with their crowd. You belong here, exactly like this. This is perfect.”

He was kissing her, and she was kissing back and still hungry.



Of the four classes Celeste took that fall, she and Anson shared two: Civilization and Culture, which traced history since Turaset’s colonization, and Global Literature, with classics and contemporary books from both Nasoir and the eastern continent, Deasoir. They sat together in both classes.

*We’re matched, she decided. Everything else will come. We are a match.*

They shared lunches with two of Anson’s friends, Oliver and Eleanor, both of whom Celeste had met before but not spent much time with. She took the lunch invitation as a sign—he was helping her acclimate to his crowd. Surely he’d talk with his parents soon. She badgered Nora to join them too.

“No, I don’t think so. They don’t think well of foothillers.”

“Oh, they like us fine, and people are people no matter if there are cultural differences or not.”

“That’s exactly what I’m saying. City folk are people. Like us. They’re a product of their upbringing. You aren’t a city girl just because you’re eating with them or wearing their hair. There’s always going to be more Collimais in you than Narona, and it’ll always be the first thing these city folk see.”



One day at lunch Celeste was nibbling a sea-vegetable wrap, thinking it'd taste better with a little goat cheese, when Anson commented that the class discussions were boring. Especially the ones tracing the history of culture.

Celeste looked up in surprise. "I thought you said they're important."

He chuckled. It didn't sound friendly. "Yes. They're very important. We're the future of Nasoir, after all. We have a *duty* to understand the entire continent. City Study will broaden our minds. How would we ever get by without it?"

Eleanor and Oliver were laughing too. Celeste wanted to slap one of them, any of them.

The classroom discussions were more than stimulating, they left her mulling her preconceptions for hours. "You don't think about things differently, afterward?"

Eleanor said, "That's funny. No, we've heard it all before, Celie."

The nickname sounded like Silly when Eleanor said it.

"A hundred times at least. It's propaganda. 'The working class is the backbone of production. The business class steers the market forces.' Farmers like you, well I guess you feed us."

Celeste had given up explaining that her family had nothing to do with farming, that an inn was a business same as any Narona hotelier. Eleanor always called her a farmgirl and it was beyond stupid that she couldn't see otherwise.

Oliver had taken over Eleanor's taunts. "...the importance of children to the future, the importance of women to drive the economy ..."

Celeste shook her head slowly. Anson grabbed her hand. "Remember? I told you when we started dating. These classes are for foothillers. It's all review for us."

"You said you hadn't been to University before."

"Sure, the program's new. But we've heard the material our whole lives."

Oliver leaned across the table, his eyes dancing. “Don’t get us wrong. We’re happy we got in. Everyone wanted in—it’s penny pie to pass, because all we need to do is get you up to speed. We even get an extra certificate at culmination. You, Celie, are in the esteemed presence of Student Ambassadors.”

Eleanor was laughing along with them. “It’s so cute, you wide-eyed foothillers.” She affected a country accent. “‘*Big city, Narona.*’ Yeah, very exciting.”

Celeste was blushing more furiously than she had in months. She hadn’t seen it, but in hindsight their words made sense. She and another girl were always the most passionate during debates, always the most outspoken while the city students, if they spoke at all, offered comments straight from the textbook. She said heatedly, “You’ve been mocking us.”

Anson sidled nearer on the bench. “No. Come on, we’re glad you’re here. All of us. You’re new. Do you have any idea how nice it is? You’re good for us arrogant ‘city folk.’ Besides, if things were reversed and we needed to learn... oh, I don’t know. How to muck out stables or something, don’t you think you’d have a laugh at our expense?”

Unsettled. No, not unsettled—sick. Nausea grew in the pit of her stomach. She was downright horrified. Hubert’s voice flooded her thoughts unbidden. “The city is unsafe. It’s filthy.”

A foothiller would never mock anyone from the city. She stood. “Perhaps you’re right. I’ll see you in class, Anson.”

She soon began questioning everything from the program’s intent to Anson’s true feelings. How much of his attention was because she was novel? When they made love, it felt true; everything in her filled. But other times the littlest thing—a stray comment about the foothills or a sideways glance from him to his friends—would dismay her and she’d stare, speechless.

“You love him, right?” Nora asked.

“Yes!” It came too quickly. “Oh. I think so Nora. What’ve I done? If I was with any boy in the foothills the way I’ve been with Anson—I mean, holy heavens. The things we’ve done! Everything you can

possibly imagine. The things in your books, we've done those. I must love him. The way we've been with each other."

If it wasn't love, then their relationship was lust and not some wide-open future. She'd come to the city, for lust. She began to cry.

Nora closed her softback and came over. She put an arm around Celeste. "Don't be stupid. You and me—we've been taught matching to a stranger is better than falling for a boy. Taught that matching is a blank page, like a field, start with nothing and hope something will grow. City folk—well, I'll give 'em this, they let their feelings decide."

But Nora hadn't followed any real feelings. She spent all her time lost in those steamy softbacks. She hadn't staked anything on a person.

"You've told him, right? That what you're doing, it would mean a huge commitment back home."

Choking, Celeste said, "It came up in Civilization and Culture. I said, I *shared* in class that courting or being matched always comes first, before anything too unusual. I know he was taking notes."

"You have to talk with him. Privately and directly. It can't be some abstract idea, like something he needs to study for a test. He has to see from your heart how you feel. If you just assume he understands, or worse, hon, if you hope he feels the same way... Oh honey. You're playing with fire."

Another sob forced its way out. Why had Anson ever caught her attention to begin with? Was it his eyes, lake-blue deeper than any she'd ever seen before? His graceful way of walking? His voice? Was it only their love-making?



Things grew worse from there, as it dawned on her that Anson never mentioned seeing her past the end of the program.

"I'd love to visit your parents' home," she said one night. They'd eaten at one of their regular haunts, an out-of-the-way bar in Naron's governance district with occasional live music. Tonight, the stage stood dark. "It must be beautiful on the bluffs. I'd really like to meet them. You know, before the program ends."

“That’s months away.” He checked his reflection in the window glass and straightened his collar, then gestured to the door.

“But should we?” she said, taking his hand. “Visit your parents?”

He didn’t answer, and they walked like that, him and her. A couple. That’s how it would look to anyone they passed. No one would see the war waging inside her, one voice insisting he loved her and another demanding to know why he hadn’t yet taken her home.

“No,” he said slowly, “I don’t think so. I told you how stuck in tradition they are.”

She pulled her hand back, cold, and picked up her pace. He hurried to catch up, “Celie, wait. Why are you upset?”

“Because,” she said, affecting the city accent to make each word stand on its own, “You promised to speak with them about me.”

“I can’t.”

She whirled around. “What do you mean, can’t?”

“Listen, they want me with a city girl. Someone starting a business, someone with a stable income.”

“*What?*”

“It’s what they expect! They’d never understand if I brought you home. And they’d pull me out of the program and start huffing that I’d wasted my chance to meet a girl with real prospects. Do you have any idea how much I’ve risked by dating you?”

“How much *you’ve* risked?”

“You want the world! I told you, my parents aren’t that. They’re anything *but* new and exciting.”

The chill in her hand scorched up her arm and into her heart. Almost a year together, yet she’d not met anyone in his life outside the university. “You’re ashamed of me.”

“No. Never. You’re just... It’s... you’re not what they expect.”

She walked faster and refused to look at him. She was more than any city girl could ever hope to be, and she had a business in Collimais all sewn up if she wanted it.

But as soon as infuriation flooded her, it bled out again, leaving a sinking sense of despair. His expectations were neither smaller nor bigger than her own.

“They have ideas, that’s all I’m saying, about my future.”

She whirled to face him. “And you don’t?”

He looked straight into her eyes. “Of course. Yes.”

“Am I part of your ideas?”

He tried to grab her hand, but she refused, and the breeze around them seemed to go straight through her and carry something away.

“Am I?” she repeated.

“Of course.”

She stared back. His eyes, those pools of gray blue, those eyes that had always captivated her. She tried to understand what she saw there. *I expect too much.* “Anson,” she said softly, “Do you have any notion how much of myself I’ve given to you? Do you have any idea of the commitment I’ve made, by any foothill standard?”

He took a step back. The breeze went between them.

“This isn’t the country, Celie.”

No. It certainly wasn’t.



Everything dulled. Celeste stopped participating in the debates, but the instructors didn’t seem to care. She took lunches alone and Anson didn’t seem bothered by that.

The noises of the city felt more like mocking voices. The yelling and hammering, the engines and sirens, everything once vibrant wore on her and clamored that she had never belonged, that she should leave.

The smells.

Nora said she didn’t notice them anymore. It was that, Celeste thought—she had to think about it to realize she was covered in city. She couldn’t remember the scent of fresh hay or lilac.

One afternoon she moped up the stairs and into their room. Nora looked up from her bed. “They won’t fail you for skipping.”

She cleared a space at her desk and fell into the chair. “I finally figured out the problem with Anson.”

“He’s taking advantage of you.”

In a surge of exasperation Celeste said, “No. If anything, I’m using him.” She took a deep lungful of air and sighed it back out, resigning herself to the details she’d worked through. “He takes my time. All of it. It’s exhausting.”

Nora snickered and held up a cover with two women. Celeste rolled her eyes. “Not like that. What I mean is, I fought with Hubert to let me come. I collected every argument I could. I told him the jobs were better, seeing new things would be good for me, that my sister Ardelle would never learn to run the inn as long as I was there, because I did everything. I even pointed out that I could send them business, from here. I could talk up the inn and send people to Collimais.”

“Very forward-thinking.”

“Nora! None of it had to do with meeting a boy. That was nowhere in my head. There are boys in Collimais! But ever since my second week here, I’ve spent all my time with Anson.” Her eyes had grown wet. All those weeks and months spent in a mindless haze focused on one person. She slumped and shuffled a few things on her desk.

Nora’s face went gentle. “Honey, I don’t think you’re being fair to yourself. You’re always talking about your last class, or your next one, and Anson shows you places we never would’ve found on our own. Him and his friends, hon, you’re learning about Narona first hand.” Nora grabbed one of Celeste’s hardbacks from the bed-stand, turned it over and ran her eyes down the back. “*Tales of the Abyss. Okeafolk and other mysteries of the deep.* Look at this. You’re reading about sea life, too.”

Maybe if Anson ever had an original idea, or if he took the time to listen when she spoke of her past, like he used to, or if he’d just take her to meet his parents, she might feel differently. “I asked again about his parents. I said if they’re so old-fashioned, a foothill girl would be just the thing to shake them up.”

Nora’s silent expression, her eyes full of concern, spoke volumes. Celeste choked back another sob. They both knew it was Anson, not his parents, keeping her from meeting them. Despairing, she said, “He

said he *likes* them boring, the way they are, because it's easier for him." She scrawled a big X on a piece of paper, crumpled the sheet and threw it as hard as she could across the room. "He actually said that. That it's easier this way."

Her eyes fell on another softback, one she'd picked up for Nora. This was life here, sex and despair. She tossed it over. "I bought this for you."

"Ooh, a three-way. Thank you, hon."

Celeste stacked her other things. A tiny scrap of paper fluttered to the floor, one of the little notes she'd written to herself, back at the inn, and brought along as a testament to determination. '*No one knows the future.*' The letters so precise, so conscientiously written. She crumpled the scrap.

"It's his accent, you know, that's the problem. It makes him sound important, like he has interesting ideas."

Celeste scoffed. "I can't go anywhere without seeing something we did. I hate it."

"Maybe you're homesick."

No. A grubby, dusty country inn was nothing to be sick for. "Family would not help."

"Yes, you are. I have new theory—you're homesick. Your papa was right about Naron, about it being dirty or whatever, and you don't want to admit it, and you aren't really done with Anson, but you still want to get away from him, and why not? He left you last summer."

"Puh."

"Yes! My theory. You want to show him he doesn't own you. Going home does that, plus it's a break. Celeste! It's what they do in these stories!" She flourished a book. "They always have a few chapters where you don't know how things are going to go. Everyone's angry, and there's no telling what's what, and this is exactly what you need to do with Anson. Leave."

"We're not a softback."



“Look, you said it yourself, city boys don’t listen, at least Anson doesn’t. I hear you. You want more than he’s giving. He was new, but when it comes down to it, he doesn’t live up to the fantasy.”

Unsettled. That’s what she felt.

Nora’s words hung in the air, like little drops of truth waiting for her to say something, out loud. To say that Anson had no more substance in his graceful bones than Naronia did.

How was this love? In any universe, how was filling a hole with a person love?

She wondered if it was her, maybe she was the shallow one, not him. She shuddered. Of course, it could go both ways—she and Anson might both be shallow. She knew so little of his past. That was part of it, there was no commonality. They were two entirely different people. Basing a relationship on novelty? It made no sense.

She felt, in this moment, the way she’d always imagined marrying a stranger might feel. She didn’t know Anson, not in any important way. He didn’t seem to care if they knew one another or not.

“And since I’ve decided you’re homesick,” Nora said, “we’ll leave. Together. Take a long weekend in Collimais.”

Celeste threw her face into her hands. If he hadn’t seen her doodling his name that first day, he might never have taken any interest in her. It hit with a wallop.

But going home and admitting Hubert had a point—that was as bad as having never left. She imagined Hubert, the tilt to his head and his crossed arms, his stance broad and Ethyl fretting. Both of them listening as Celeste admitted failure. “Nora, I can’t.”

“Oh, don’t be a baby. You’ve been gone forever. Go home, take me with you, and make it a victory march. Wear city clothes! And get your hair trimmed up. Show them you’ve made it.”

She could, she thought. Go home as a city woman. They might see it like that.

“It’s just a long weekend,” Nora said. “And hey! Harvest is underway. We’ll see the caravan wagons, and you’ll tell your parents it’s all for me. I’m begging you,” Nora said with eyes full of laughter. “Take me to see the Caravan wagons. Pleeease.”

Celeste began to chuckle. Time away, time home, and claiming it was for Nora. “They’ll put us to work.”

“So?”

She grabbed Nora in a hug. “All right. We’ll do it.”

## CHAPTER THREE

The inn was packed with Caravan guests, and Hubert and Ethyl were too busy settling them to throw any judgment of any sort in Celeste's direction.

"I told you," Nora whispered. "They don't care who was right."

Being ignored was worse. Her parents said nothing about her pleated skirt or spiked hair. Ethyl at least should have noticed, but she only said, "We're full. You're in Ardelle's room."

In that tiny closet? With Ardelle? Celeste suppressed her annoyance, took a breath and nodded without saying a word. She led Nora down the hallway, to the cramped little bedroom. "Absolutely infuriating. It's smaller than our dormitory room. I bet Ardelle put them up to it."

"Celeste, your inn is *full*."

Ardelle walked in and said with disgust, "I don't want you in here."

Celeste dropped her bag. "Oh, trust me, us either." It smelled like sweaty feet and sweaty shirts.

Nora looked from one to the other. She threw an arm around Ardelle and said, "I've got a brother your age."

"So?"

"So I'll tell you something I'd never tell him." Nora kept her voice low and leaned in like an old friend.

Ardelle watched warily. "All right. What is it?"

Nora whispered, "Foothill boys have bigger packages than city boys."

After a minute Ardelle broke out laughing, and so did Celeste.



Two of the guests were young men, no more than twenty-two or twenty-three. One of them had a sharp gaze, flinty sharp. The other seemed content. Smiling and dimpled, he tried to start a conversation with Celeste while she filled out the register. His words had a rhythm to them, almost musical.

Both wore suits of the tightly-woven fabric sold at high-end clothiers in Naron. And both seemed to be inspecting the inn.

She felt suddenly self-conscious at how backward the place felt.

Their eyes travelled along the check-in desk like trawlers dredging offshore for who-knew-what. The steely-eyed one looked across the hall, to the dining room, and the other turned to Hubert. He explained he was with the combustion industry, seemed to be trying to draw Hubert into conversation too, but Hubert kept his answers short.

The man had horrible scarring around his ear, raised and pinkish. Celeste handed him a key and tried not to stare at the scarring. She directed them to a room upstairs. After they'd gone, Hubert said, "Steer clear of them two."

"I've been around plenty of city men, Hubert." She had. She was a city woman now.

His eyes narrowed. "You're my daughter, Celeste, and they're with Combustion. We've warned you about folk like that. About Ethyl's papa. You steer clear of those two."

The words pulled at memories. Stories, when Celeste was small, of the combustion industry tracking people, taking them hostage or some nonsense. Celeste hadn't believed it, not then and certainly not now. A city industry wouldn't waste time on anything to do with a small town.

The next morning at breakfast, Celeste helped Ardelle with the quick-cakes, but her mind wasn't on it. She'd been so cramped all night, lying on the floor between Ardelle's bed and Nora. Hard and uneven floorboards. She hadn't been able to sleep, just lay there thinking about Anson. His need to marry someone with a solid future, because his parents had no business to hand down to him. She'd rolled over, turned her pillow, tried to find a better position, thinking the inn could be hers someday, and she'd be able to support a family. But the thought of him visiting here had filled her with shame. To a man like

Anson, who took summers on the southern isles, this smelly inn would be little more than a hovel.

Ardelle grabbed her wrist, bringing her thoughts back to the breakfast preparations. “Celeste! That’s too much sugar.”

“Like you’d know.”

“Of course I know. You’re using so much sweetening someone will complain. Cut back.” Ardelle looked into the dining room again, directly at those city men.

“Don’t stare,” Celeste whispered. “They’ll think you’re interested.”

Ardelle scoffed. “Interested? What, you think they’d take advantage of me? Let them try.” But she went behind the kitchen door and peered through the crack.

“Ardelle. Stop it. I know boys like that. The way you’re looking at them is too forward.” It was the principle, really. She knew men like this and Ardelle didn’t.

Ardelle didn’t budge.

“I’m serious. Leave them be.”

“Bel above. Shh! I’m listening.”

Celeste hissed, “*I’m* the one you should listen to. I know the cost of giving city boys mind. If you’re reading them wrong, trust me, you aren’t ready. What if one of them takes an interest?”

Ardelle shook her head.

Of course, she could tell Ardelle about Anson, about his disinterest in anything to do with things she cared about. His attitude, his refusal to take her to his parents’ house. A pang of despair hit her. No. It would give voice to the very thing she was here to avoid.

Still at the crack, Ardelle’s face had gone pale. “They’re talking about Grandpapa.”

“You’re imagining things.”

“I’m not imagining anything. They’re watching everyone, and one of them said ‘Ethyl’s father.’ It’s exactly like Hubert used to say. Remember? When Grandpapa would visit.”

Celeste grabbed Ardelle by the arm and pulled her to the stove. “You listen. Those were fright stories to make us behave.”

Ardelle's face grew tighter and firmer and more like Ethyl's. Celeste released her arm and grabbed a plateful of cakes. "Take this out. Come straight back."

Ardelle yanked the plate and went. Celeste stewed over a pot of brewing camsin. Those boys would have no reason to talk about Grandpapa. He'd been gone for years. Nervously, she risked a glance. They were at the main table with a few other guests. They were listening, more than speaking.

She steeled her nerves, took the camsin out and set the pot between them. The one with the angry eyes snapped his gaze to her and she startled and pulled back, but not before she saw him nudge his companion, who looked up with a smile.

"You're the one who checked us in. Your Ethyl's daughter?" His voice was rich, almost musical, and she felt her eyes go wide.

*But they're no different than Anson or Oliver or anyone else in Narona.* She pulled herself tall. "I'm my own woman."

He laughed. "Of course you are, and quite a fashionable one at that. I could almost mistake you for a city girl."

His friend didn't say a word, just stared at the side of her face. His gaze felt as though he'd bore straight into her temple if he could, and she brushed her cheek self-consciously and hurried back to the kitchen.

"See?" Ardelle said. "They set my teeth on edge."

"They're odd. Odd," she repeated, her voice shaking. "Leave them be."

Still—their attention was wrong. And it wasn't down to them being from the city, either. More than odd. They were disturbing.

After breakfast, hoping to clear her mind, she took Nora down to Collimais' main street. The central thoroughfare had been spruced up, and a few shops were freshly painted. And yet. The wooden walks were buckled and splintered. Sections of railing were missing—none of this was anything like Narona. Celeste stammered through a tour, unsure why she even cared what Nora thought, she really didn't, but half her thoughts were still on Anson.

What a pathetic, run-down little place Collimais was. He'd never want to live in a place like this!

Eventually, she stopped in front of the saddest dress shop on the entire continent and collapsed against the wall. She plucked at her belt.

"Celeste, honey, stop. I don't care what Collimais looks like. Believe me, Hervemais' just as faded. Hervemais is the most grotesque, dusty, vile... repulsive... um... hideous..."

Celeste started to smile.

"... warty... oh, Hervemais is just absolutely *gruesome*... and ghastly... it's foul, and dreadful... positively odious..."

Celeste laughed. "Stop it. It's not that Collimais is so horrible." Well, it was, but that wasn't all of it. "It's that I'm being sucked back in. The cooking and guests and—Ah! I hate it here! There's nothing. And all I can think is this is my future."

"Well, silly, that's because you're twisted up over Anson."

It was Nora's answer for everything. Celeste pressed her lips together.

"He was supposed to be your escape. And he isn't. He's got you so confused you think you only have two choices—him or here."

"I'm not upset over Anson."

"You've been sippy for weeks. They called it something in class—transferral, I think."

"No. It isn't him, I mean it, Nora. I ran from Collimais, now I'm running from him. The problem's *me*. I run when things are hard. Eleanor said we foothillers are weak, and I'm starting to think she's right."

"Eleanor's full of scat. She has no idea what we live with. You're marriageable, hon, we both are. You could take over the inn. None of *them* will be matched off. They can build any business they want, they're expected to, on their own time. From the day they're born they choose where to go." Nora's voice grew bitter. "From the day they're born. For them, life's a piece of piss."

No, that kind of life wouldn't be easy either. Her mama Ethyl used to say foothill women were strong because of the traditions in the foothills, and women in the belt stronger yet. Come heat or hail, a

farmwife kept her family going. Come drought or flood, a miner's wife still got food on the table.

Nora said, "My best friend was matched before I left for City Study. She probably has a baby by now. Can you imagine? Everything's rushing at us so fast it's a wonder we're keeping our heads straight at all."

Maybe. It was possible. Anson might have been so irresistible not because he was a match... but because he wasn't. "That's why I like the idea of him," she said softly. Nora didn't hear. It didn't matter.

"I mean, Ardelle could marry any day. She's running whole parts of your inn. Anybody can see it. She's marriageable."

True. Ardelle wasn't the girl she'd been. "You know, when she was twelve she refused to so much as light the stove. I had to do it because she was afraid. I thought she'd never grow up." Regret filled her. She'd had so little faith in Ardelle, had said straight to her face that she'd never make a decent match. What a stupid thing to say. Her stomach twisted, and she resolved to set things right. "Do you want to be matched?"

Nora laughed. "Oh hon, not if I can help it. I have plans. Remember? Start a business in Vastol, different from Mama's. I'll run it my way. Maybe I'll sell softbacks."

Celeste fiddled with a nail in the windowsill. Tradition was comfortable. Predictable. "Bearing children because it's what we do. Bel above, it always felt so far away, but here we are."



That evening Nora asked to go to the nightly Caravan festival on the wagon grounds, and Ardelle shook her head. "It's so rowdy. You get turned around and can't find your way out."

"That many people?"

Celeste nodded. "Yes, with all the growers coming in, but it's no worse than the clubs in Naronia."

"Spare me your vast knowledge on crowds, Celeste. Anyway, Ethyl's showing me how to settle receipts tonight."



“Honey, receipts?” Nora pulled Ardelle close, and it looked for all the world like something from the dormitories—one foothiller cajoling another into a dare. “You’re not getting out of it that easy. Stick with us. We’ll keep your head straight.”

Ardelle crossed her arms and looked off to the side, but a bare smile played on her mouth. She didn’t respond but she didn’t pull away. and Celeste wondered why it’d never occurred to her to treat Ardelle like a friend. She really was no different than the girls in the dormitory. “Please come, Delle. I’ll show you how to run receipts in the morning. Come on, we’ll have a great time.”

“*You’re inviting me?*”

Celeste stifled her laughter. “I actually missed you. And you’ve changed. Please come—it won’t be fun otherwise.”



The smells coming off the green stripped the past year away. Roast fowl and onions, caramel apple, fresh cut hay. No automobile exhaust, no wet pavement or radiator must or ocean tang. Just foothill smells, down to the last scent.

In the middle of the green, a man in overalls was belting out songs with a few other folks playing their tars. They ringed around in a semicircle, singing, *‘Goats in the pen and latched up tight/ kiss the little babies in the hay each night...’*

“Come on!” Celeste said, pulling the others to a row of line dancers. Nora must have known the dance—she joined in straight away. This song had six movements, each faster than the last, each with a different count to the measure. During the second movement, Celeste threw an arm around Ardelle and muttered, “This used to be easier.”

By the third movement her concentration was full-on with the pattern. Knee up, cross tap, triple-step. By the fourth, everything was too fast. With tears of laughter down her cheeks she cried, “I give up,” fell out of the line and collapsed on a bank of chairs a little way off. A few moments later Nora came over, laughing just as hard. Somehow

Ardelle finished it all, all six movements, and joined them, panting, her hair coiling around her face.

Celeste patted a chair. “Oh, that was great. You were amazing, Delle. You did the whole thing.”

But Ardelle didn’t sit. Her eyes had settled on a pair—the city men, they were here, standing past one of the whiskey carts. The one with such oddly gray, almost colorless eyes seemed to be studying people.

Celeste sat straighter. It chilled her to see him scrutinizing her neighbors. The other one, with the scarring, was speaking to him in what looked like an urgent way.

“Excuse me,” Ardelle said, starting over.

“Wait.” Celeste stood and grabbed her. “You cannot walk up to them.”

Ardelle looked her straight in the eyes. “Watch me.” She pulled her arm away and strode over and started in, leaning forward and cutting through the air with her hand, again and again. Her words were impossible to hear, but the men faced her, unspeaking, looking perplexed.

“We should go over.”

“We’re watching,” Nora said. “It’s not like she’s inviting them, the way she’s acting.”

The men paid attention to Ardelle. They responded to her, calmly it seemed. Their demeanor was nothing like Anson’s; they nodded, seemed to listen. After a bit, the one with the colorless eyes held out his hand but she smacked it away, turned and stalked back. “I hate them.”

“Why? What did they say?”

She looked physically ill. Celeste pulled Ardelle to the chair and this time she took it. “They said scat about sacrifice. They went on about electricity and how it makes life better for everyone.”

“What?”

“They said if you stand in the path of progress, you need to get out of the way.”

Seeming more puzzled than before, Nora said again, “What?”

“I’m sure it’s nothing sinister, Ardelle.”

Her sister’s voice rose. “Of course it’s sinister. Don’t you remember? Grandpapa said that *they* said he stood in the way of progress. Those exact words. And Hubert said to give those two their space.”

“So ask Ethyl. Ask Hubert. Ask them if those stories were made up or not.” Celeste was certain—they were fantastical bedtime tales, no more.

“Oh believe me, I will.” Ardelle blew a long breath out to the side. More quietly, she said, “And then the other one said their industry is like our inn. That we make decisions toward profit, and they do the same. He said, if you can believe it, we’re the same as them.”

“Could be a fair point.”

Nora nudged her in the ribs. “This isn’t a debate.”

Ardelle said between gritted teeth, “We aren’t *tracking* people. We aren’t killing anyone.”

“Neither are they. *You* used to refuse to settle at bedtime. Don’t you remember? The story always ended with our little beds being the mountains we would run off to. And it worked. You hid under the blankets until you fell asleep.”

Ardelle fixed her with a scathing look before standing and leaving. Celeste slumped back, deflated. Ardelle had more determination than Celeste had ever seen and in some ways, it felt, she realized with a stab of sadness, that they’d grown apart.

Voices fell on her ears, the familiar accents of Collimais and the courser diction from the agricultural belt. The smells kept shifting too, with more sweat on the breeze, and underneath it the rank earthiness of manure.

This was no city, not by a long shot. But if the inn were wired for electricity, if it had a decent heating system, it would be more *like* a city. One person could run it alone. There’d be no need for the carriage, or horses—not if they had an aut.

The thoughts roiled away at her. They felt like an argument Eleanor would voice. Celeste swallowed. Surely she didn’t agree more

with Eleanor than Ardelle. Her fists had clenched. She forced herself to relax.

“It *is* odd how those two stare at everyone.”

The men were still over there, heads together, unspeaking. Both had their eyes on an older woman, a neighbor from down the street, Gretel de Thom. Gretel was with a second woman, whom Celeste didn’t recognize. The men watched Gretel, but not her companion.

Celeste shook her head. They couldn’t be tracking Gretel. Or anyone. The idea that her grandpapa lived in hiding because of Combustion? Taking a breath to clear her thoughts, she said, “So much drama.”

Nora nodded, and after a moment her voice turned daring. “You’re right. We’re not here to solve some old mystery. We’re here to have fun.”

With the dancing, and whiskey at hand, and lanterns throwing crazy shadows everywhere, Celeste started smiling, too.

Nora tipped her head past Celeste. “Speaking of which, someone’s watching *you*.”

Celeste glanced over. A farmer nodded at her, and she dropped her gaze. He was an oak tree of a man over there, planted a few chairs down. Not a graceful man; more of a solid man. “Not interested,” Celeste said.

He wouldn’t catch her attention under any circumstance. He was the sort of belter that came through from time to time, hauling grain or driving in a few halter-broke foals. The kind of hard-working man Eleanor would laugh about, when she spoke of backward country folk. The kind of man Mama Ethyl always said would find a strong woman one day.

Nora was still looking past Celeste, and her eyes grew wider.

“Ma’am.”

Celeste turned to find the farmer standing right there. His jaw was strong, defined, like the edge of a field. Even in the dim light, she could see that.

“I’m sorry, I don’t know you.” She said the habitual words learned as a child by instinct, the reply that couldn’t be mistaken. Words to turn a possible suitor away.

He looked pained.

She had Anson. Well, she might, or she might not, but in any case, this farmer didn’t interest her. “I don’t know you,” she repeated. The ridiculousness of it all struck her. She’d done as she pleased with Anson, without any regard for any old courtship code. And yet here she was, falling into country mannerisms by habit.

“Name’s Terrence.”

Astonished, she shook her head. “I’m very sorry. I don’t believe we’ve met. *Ever*.”

His face seemed kind. He wore his hair long; it would probably fall past his shoulders if he took it out of the thong that pulled it back. She said with the firm tone of finality, “I’m sorry, Terrence, I’m very sorry, but you and I are complete strangers.”

At last, his expression fell. “Ma’am.” He turned and walked away.

The timber of his voice, so deep. Nora stared at her. “Celeste! He really likes you!”

“He’s rude.” She followed him with her eyes.

## CHAPTER FOUR

The next day, Ardelle kept watching the city men, and before the morning was out Celeste wanted to lock her in the bedroom for it. By the end of the day, she'd had enough. "You're driving me crazy. Just *ignore* them." They were in the back hallway, away from the guests.

"Di Rey said it's our genes."

"What? Which one is he?"

"The angry one. The one who never smiles. He said we carry bad genes, from forever ago. He said our *genes* are bad, that we're dirty because of it. I wanted to punch him. I wanted to punch him and drag him around the table."

There'd been so many classroom debates, so many times Celeste had argued for the foothill side of things, but now she saw the city side too. Ardelle knew nothing else except foothill culture. To have a city boy tell Ardelle that her own children, who had yet to be conceived, might carry bad genes? That was beyond offensive—it was a personal assault, and Celeste winced. "You feel angry."

"What I *feel* is he's an ass."

Celeste hugged her. "They're throwing your future into doubt before it even begins."

Ardelle pulled away, her eyes wet. "He said bad genes skip and our babies might have it even if we don't. I don't have bad genes."

"Of course you don't! Neither of us do. Look at you, Ardelle, you don't have a single bad gene in you." The tactlessness of it all—was that all they saw? *Genes*?

"He said some genes used to be important, and now they have to be excised. That was the very word he used, Celeste. *Excised*."

Celeste swallowed hard. Motherhood might be just around the corner for Ardelle. Or for her for that matter, when City Study ended. Ardelle even looked like Ethyl now. It was her expression, Celeste thought, something in her face had firmed into fortitude. "For anyone

to say that is atrocious. Delle, he needs to be straightened out. Let's head over to the green. We'll slap sense into those two. Knock 'em down and slug 'em around for their own good. I'm big enough to hold di Rey, if you want to sock him."

Ardelle eased into a smile. "Maybe we'll just start with talking. Thank you, Celeste."

They made to leave, but upon opening the door found the young farmer with his hand up. He lowered it.

"Ma'am."

It was the boy from last night, the farmer, there on the porch, tall and solid and wearing cleaner clothes than before. Actually, not a boy at all. A young man. Terrence, he'd said.

He removed his hat and worked at it, looking at Celeste with a sort of earnest directness. "You're lookin' well."

Ardelle gasped softly, and Celeste said in an undertone, "Just give me a minute."

Ardelle edged around Terrence. "I'm fine, Celeste. Take your time. You can find me later." She left.

Celeste wondered how the young man had found her home, or why he'd even looked—she'd been clear last night. Terrence should know she wasn't interested, and yet, there'd been a spark. Perplexed, she stood aside. "I'm surprised to see you. Well, come in."

She led the way to the front visiting room and sat. "My name's Celeste."

"Celeste," he said, not taking a chair.

He kept a broad stance, and he didn't have a spare ounce of cushion on him anywhere. With his sleeves rolled up as they were, it was plain he'd done his fair share of farm work.

"Not here t'take your time, ma'am, or be overly forward. Wanted to meet proper's all."

"It's nice to meet you, Terrence. I trust you've had a good harvest?" Social noise, nothing more. A safe question.

He smiled off to the side before meeting her eyes. "Good harvest, ma'am, thank you for enquiring. Would you care t'go to the square with me?"

“Oh.” Her heart pounded at his ongoing directness, his insistence, the way he broke with every convention they both would have been raised to. “Umm, Terrence, it seems you’ve come courting and I’m not certain it’s a good idea. I think it isn’t.”

He stood silent and expectant. He didn’t seem bothered at all by her response. It was an honest thing, his expression, like the rising of the suns. Biding his time, over there, it didn’t seem to concern him; he was content, perhaps waiting for her to say more.

She had more to say. “You see, Terrence, I’m in a schooling program in Naron. It’s put on by their city council, and I’ve been there, taking classes. I’m only home for a few days then going back. So, I’m not really available.” She looked down at her lap and fiddled with her thumb, because in truth it was Anson, not the program, at the root of things. She’d been with him so intimately. They were a couple; a pair. If Anson lived here, in Collimais, and if they’d been with one another as they had been in Naron, Terrence wouldn’t dare court. No one would. She took a breath. “Well. And there’s a young man, too.”

“Courtin’ you?”

The way he said it was as straightforward as his hat, and she burst out in laughter. “It’s not like that. Maybe he is, in his way. I don’t know, I mean I thought he was, but then it seemed he saw me as nothing more than a different sort of girl than he might find in the city. I’m not sure his attention has anything to do with *me* so much as the fact that I’m not like anyone he grew up with. He’s a nice boy, I suppose, but I really couldn’t say if he’s courting me. I don’t think so.”

Terrence sat. He didn’t speak, and Celeste wondered why she’d said so much. Why under the heavens had she just bared her soul to this stranger? This man who sat so quietly, patient, at peace over there.

She’d probably never see him again—he’d be gone after Caravan, back to some farm in the middle of the belt, and she’d be back in Naron before then anyway. That was it, she decided, why she’d said more than she had even to her own sister.

“And the classes,” he said. “They good?”

“Yes.”

He was like soil, like the morning dawn. He was easy to be with.



He grinned. "Good. That's real good, Celeste."

"I mean, this program, they have us learning things I never would've questioned before. It's not at all like the schooling here. We're debating ideas, Terrence, about everything under the suns. What it means to be a person, what it means to be a society. And math of course, and science."

He looked very intently at her, his brow furrowed in attention. "Is it useful? D'you find it useful?"

"Yes! I've had so many new thoughts. But here's the strangest thing. I always expected the city would be bigger, and of course it is. But at the same time it isn't. Not like I expected. Naron's just different."

She sat there, and so did he, resting his elbows on his knees, watching her with a frank expression.

"Well, and then all of the books. There are so many ideas in the world, so many opinions. I'm taking a class on design, and we're learning how creativities influence politics and fashion. How they influence farming."

Terrence guffawed.

"No, it's true. There's a thing called the perfect ratio. Creativities use it all the time when they design sculptures and paintings, but you see the ratio in hay bales too. Field dimensions are usually close to the perfect ratio. And it wasn't invented by them, of course, because creativities are inspired by nature. So it came from nature, into art, and then back into the world—like into farming. Or politics. Or inn-keeping," she said, picking up the ledger on the little table between them. "This is very close to the perfect ratio."

His eyes had crinkled, and he looked straight into her own. It felt like a boat mooring onto the docks. "You've given me somethin' t'think on, ma'am. I appreciate that."

She looked down with a small smile. "I did go on a bit, didn't I?"

"It's good y'got somethin' t'care about. And the program sounds real good." He stood.

"Are you leaving?" The words came on their own. She found herself standing.

“I think it best.”

“Oh.” A small ache slipped through her. “Well. You’re probably right, Terrence. I’m glad you stopped by.”

“Ma’am.”



The inn’s front door opened and morning light spilled through the doorway. Ethyl came in and fell to the small sofa in the front room, where Celeste and Nora had been waiting for the hired aut to arrive.

“What’s wrong, Mama?”

Ethyl’s face was in her hands now, and her shoulders were shaking. She looked up, her expression bleak. “Gretel didn’t make it home last night.”

Gretel—the neighbor at the green two nights earlier. Celeste went to Ethyl and put an arm around her. “I saw her two nights back. She looked fine. She was with a friend. I’m sure she’s fine.”

Ethyl swallowed and shook her head. “I was just at her place. The friend is her cousin. Gretel’s missing. They’ve been searching for hours.”

“What happened?”

Ethyl looked at her straight on. “Those two with Combustion checked out last night.”

Celeste felt her face drain. “Mama. Those were fright stories. They weren’t real.”

“Hubert’s still at Gretel’s place. He doesn’t want you going back to Narona. He thinks Collimais is safer, but plainly it isn’t.”

“Those were *stories*,” Celeste repeated.

“Celeste, you’re not in danger. You’ve never been in danger. You and Ardelle are normal young women, as normal as I am. But, when you have children, they might be cursed. I hope to all the heavens it’s out of our blood. Put it out of mind. Just put it out of mind.”

“Out of mind? Gretel’s missing! And you’re saying those men are responsible?”

“Ah! I wish you’d left already. Don’t pay it mind, Celeste. She may well turn up. Focus on your studies.” She looked at Nora and spoke with firmness. “Both of you. You are bright young women. Get as much out of that program as you can, and when it ends, bring what you learn back to us.”

## CHAPTER FIVE

The drive was quiet, a soulful sort of waiting. Celeste watched the mountains wind by, her thoughts on the old stories. Those city men, who were like Anson and yet nothing like him. Anson had no designs on her future—that was the entire problem. Those two at the inn, they'd have ideas about her if they saw her—what had Ardelle said?—As standing in the way of progress. Gretel did no such thing. Gretel stood in the way of no one.

The automobile bumped and jostled along. Next to her, Nora was subdued. As they rounded the last of the eastern hills down toward the coastal flatlands, Celeste breathed heavy. "I'll break it off with Anson tonight."

"No. Celeste. It's only eight months to the end of the year. He'll end it then, as soon as the program's over."

But meeting a boy had never been the reason to leave Collimais, and once the program ended, she'd be back at the inn. Anson... their relationship pulled her down, like lead, wasting precious time to enjoy her last months of freedom. The time between now and the day she'd return to chores and receipts.

They arrived at the dorm and Nora said, "You've been with him so long, a breakup is more trouble than it's worth, especially with a new term about to start. Especially after what happened at the inn, you're better off coasting. Stay with Anson."

"No. This is my time, not his." She dropped her things and went to the boys' dormitory.

"Anson, we need—"

"Celie! Where were you? Did you go home?" He grabbed her around the waist and lifted her, buried his nose in her neck.

"You went looking for me?"

"I wanted to show you something." He set her down and pulled a flyer from his desk. "A troop of creativists is coming into Narona."

The flyer said, ‘*Nature as Art, Nature in Art, Nature is Art.*’ “See? Celie? I know how much you like this stuff. We’ll go, yeah?”

“Oh, Anson...” Her heart melted as she read the sheet. All of the important creatives would be there. Pejulise, Vandel. She smiled at an image on the flyer. “They used the perfect ratio.”

“We’ll go.” He lifted her again, and she fell into habit.

The weeks passed, and they spent time with his friends or alone. As often as not they’d go to the docks, and there was a certain old-sock feel to it all. “You don’t have oceans,” he’d say. “We should come to the docks more, while you’re still here.”

Somewhere through it all, the idea of meeting his parents had died. There were four months until the end of the program, and she was still with this boy. It was no more of a future than it ever had been.

She had to end it, take these last months for herself.

She nibbled on a dinner wrap one night. Grilled scallops in a sea-grain pastry. She and Anson were strolling the central pier, sea birds diving into the waves nearby and the wind whipping her hair back. She took a bite and chewed, thinking through her words.

“Anson,” she said at last, “There’s only a few months left. I’d like to—”

He took her free hand with a grin. “Make the most of it, right?”

“No. I need time for myself. Time with Nora. I want to see things, you know, on my own.”

“Well, sure. Do that.”

He didn’t seem to be listening. She pulled her hand away, and his face settled into the puzzled lines she’d come to dislike. Her words were plain enough. “I’m saying there are other things I want to do but I’m always with you.”

“We’re good together.”

She tossed her head to the side.

Gray-green waves slapped against the pier posts underneath them, and a few nanquits spun around in the water. One wrapped about a fish and tumbled downward.

“I’m saying I need more for *me* before I go home.”

She couldn't look at him. Any foothill boy would understand; Terrence would have yielded by now. Her heart was a hammer, sledging away. But he said nothing. She looked over. His face had gone smooth.

“Did you hear me?”

He was focused outward. A low howl was rising. He grabbed the railing, his expression intent.

“Anson?”

“Celie, quiet.” He put a finger on her lips but didn't even glance over, didn't so much as acknowledge her question. She could scream at this man and he wouldn't hear.

The howl grew louder. Whatever the sound was, it seemed to be changing into notes now, modulating into melodies. Crescendos, diminuendos, cascades of sound. Each bit of it battled for her attention; she couldn't find the source—it was the sea, no, it was all around them now, the sea embraced them. The sound wrapped them up. Song carried them.

She forgot Anson, forgot the nanquits and her meal and everything else as the mournful crying, the breaking harmonies, enveloped her. The music was voices, heavenly ancestors reaching out, angels through the water, speaking to them.

Everyone on the pier stood transfixed.

“It's beautiful,” Celeste murmured. The song spun up and down again, and tears gathered in her eyes; the sound filled her, took control of her, became sensual as it coruscated through her.

Hoarsely, he said, “It's sea song. It's the okeafolk. They're so close.”

His voice, his whole expression was rapt, his attention on the waves. As she looked around, Celeste realized all the men were like that, leaning over the rails, their jaws slack; one was climbing over, a woman pulling at him to keep him from falling in.

Okeafolk?

The music was haunting, like wind caressing the rocky shore, pulsing through boles and caves. Pressure building and releasing.

“Anson,” she said. He didn’t respond, his face frozen. She took his hand. “Anson!”

He pulled away, waved her silent. He gripped the railing, and Celeste began to panic that he’d throw himself headlong at the waves, but the music was starting to fade. It seemed to collapse in a great sigh.

Anson shook his head. His face was flushed. “It’s beautiful.”

“I just said that.”

“You did?” He looked puzzled again, but after a moment grabbed her, kissed her more passionately than he had in months. Against her wishes, she responded. The memory of the music cried through her, demanded to be heard, answered, and here he was, ready. A small receding part of her screamed that she must end the relationship, but instead they were back in his room, in his bed. He begged her to bind him, to suffocate him, to hurt him in ways they never had before.

She did, without thinking, until with a jolt she recognized his demands from the okeafolk legends. Tentacled creatures pulling men down to the abyss, wrapping and binding and dismembering them.

Caught in the frenzy she wanted this too, she took his belt, looped it around his neck, pulled it snug. She tied his hands, spread him wide, the haunting refrain of those ghostly sounds repeating, swelling, moaning, fading, starting again. He cried and begged for more.

Underneath this bizarre passion lay certainty that men throughout the city were demanding this. Tangled within her own confusion, dancing around her thoughts, like a taunting alien child, was the idea that their passion sprang from Turaset itself. Whatever sea-spell the okeafolk had cast, *that* was the source of this, driving them to new depths.

Afterward, horrified, Celeste pulled her knees to her chest and sat, shaking and shamed, in the corner of the bed, her skin cold. He slept beside her, his chest rising and falling evenly.

She ran to his toilet and vomited, then hugged her knees again.



A week later she ended things. It was lunchtime, and they weren't alone, but the place wasn't so noisy that she couldn't speak quietly.

"Anson. I'm done. It's over." Her gut twisted.

"What did you say?"

"I said I'm breaking with you."

Saying it was easier the second time.

He stared. "You're breaking up with me?"

"Yes. How many times do you need to hear it?"

Unbelievable, how direct she needed to be. City folk had funny ideas about what it meant to be refined. Terrence would not have been puzzled. That farm boy would have understood her intent weeks ago. And he—holy heavens, she almost laughed outright again—some of the food on her tray might have sat on Terrence's caravan wagon. Terrence himself might have grown the apple she'd eaten.

"I thought you liked being with me."

Well of course that's how he'd see it. She said, as though to a child, "You're very nice, but you never talk about a future for us, or where we might go. You've never taken me anywhere, not outside the city, and you've never suggested anything to look forward to after the program." She sighed. Ridiculous.

"Celie, you're going back to your inn. There *is* nothing, not after it ends."

He said it so bluntly, like the past year and a half meant nothing. She sighed again, this time in realization. It was her, chasing him, that had made him seem like a bright future. *She* was the wide-open future, not Naron. Not Anson.

This vapid boy, his reason for being in the program a calculation, even the way he moved seemed sinuous instead of graceful now. The thoughts weren't charitable, and she tried for a moment to see the thrilling young man she'd fallen for. She sighed again. "I'm sorry, Anson. I hope we can be friends."

He scoffed angrily. "Friends?"

"Yes. We've shared—"

"Pointless." He pushed out of his chair and strode off.





The final weeks were all loose ends. She and Nora ticked through their list. They visited an out-of-the-way museo up the coast and spent a weekend in Sangal, a city much like Naroná but less sprawling.

The program ended. They packed up, and after she stripped her mattress and emptied her shelves, Celeste slumped back against the wall. “That’s it, I guess.” Her words sounded forlorn even to her own ears. They almost echoed in a room too small without clutter to fill it.

Nora crammed things into her bags. “Staying longer wouldn’t make this any easier.”

“It could.”

Nora took a long look around the room. “According to them, this isn’t the end of the program anyway. We go home, spread ideas around—”

“I know! I’m just sad.”

Nora’s face broke and she grabbed Celeste in a hug. “Send letters.”

“I will.” Celeste began to cry.

“You’ve been a good friend.”

“Bit backwards,” Celeste whispered. She pulled away, holding Nora at arm’s length and searching her face. After a moment, they cracked into laughter. Celeste said, wiping her eyes, “Come visit. You know where I live.”



Once home, Celeste dropped her bags and fell on the sofa in the front room. More tears worked their way out.

The classes, the city, the debates. The ocean and the people. All of that, done and gone, and there’d be chores by morning. She wiped her cheeks.

A head poked around the doorframe. Ardelle came and sat quietly in the chair, the straight-back one Terrence had used during harvest season. She put a hand on Celeste’s knee. “I’m glad you’re back.”

“Me too.”

“You don’t look glad.”

Next to the front door the same coat rack stood, draped with the same coats. The dust on the mantle was probably the same dust, and the inn smelled the same, like the dust, like tired upholstery.

“I never left, did I? I’m falling right back into this.”

“No,” Ardelle said softly. “You’re different. You look older. More like a city girl. You sound like them too.”

Celeste looked up. Ardelle was seventeen now—and she looked pretty, and more responsible somehow. She’d been such an annoying little tagalong for so many years, but she’d grown. Ardelle probably had a few new ideas herself, and she must be handling more of the inn’s business.

A spurt of something forced through Celeste. It wasn’t merriment, but it was closer to that than to dragging despair, and she wondered, in a debate-sort-of-way, why pretty or responsible should matter. Ardelle was right, she’d changed. “I sound like a city girl? That’s an interesting idea. I guess I am a little different after all.”

Maybe they’d grow close.

“I brought some books home, Ardelle. All of them, actually, everything I could carry. Some of them are, um, in very bad taste. Why don’t we go through them?”

Ardelle looked at her, her face screwing up as it used to when she was little. “You want to go through books, with me?”

Celeste laughed. “I do. Yes. Please, let’s do that. Together.”

THE END