

SOMEWHERE IN BETWEEN

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Tonight, like every night-cycle, I steal away from the artificial lights and towering skyscrapers to empty fields. Leaving my shoes behind, I run through the icy grass to the edge of the border, letting the clean air fill my lungs. Here you can see the stars, and not the semi-realistic dots of light that are scattered over every ceiling in my city, actual stars made of fire and gas and energy.

Sam always tells me that my freckles look like stars. When we're lying in the dew-laced grass on the edge of the border, she'll trace the constellations on my cheeks with her calloused fingers and smile. "You tell me your people look for their fates in the heavens," she will whisper, her amber eyes gleaming, "and they must be right, for when I look at you, I see my future."

A future. It's a promise neither of us can keep, yet it still curls around my heart, a tendril of sunlight warming me through. A dangerous hope.

I reach the border, pressing my hands against the wall of darkness. On the other side is Sam's city, a world forever bright, a world of never-ending daytime. It should be impossible to break through, but it isn't for us.

With a deep breath, I push through the nothingness, my ears popping as I emerge in the InBetween. Sam is already here, sitting beneath the drooping willow tree, her head tipped back against the gnarled trunk. She smiles when she sees me, and my stomach drops.

Heavens, that smile. Warm and pure, like a lighthouse's beacon shining



out into the tumultuous sea of my life. Whenever the permanent night of my city gets too much, when I'm sick of the fake stars and everyone's unquestioning belief in the predictions plastered over every billboard, I just remember Sam smiling at me. Like I'm the light in her life.

"Sam!" I exclaim, unable to help the heat that rises to my cheeks.

"Hello," she replies, getting to her feet and dusting off her trousers. In the pink light her rich brown skin glows and her braided hair seems to sparkle, until her whole being looks ethereal. She could be a sun goddess. She's certainly a blessing.

"Did you bring them?" I ask, my eyes trailing to the small leather bag attached to her belt along with her metal-working tools.

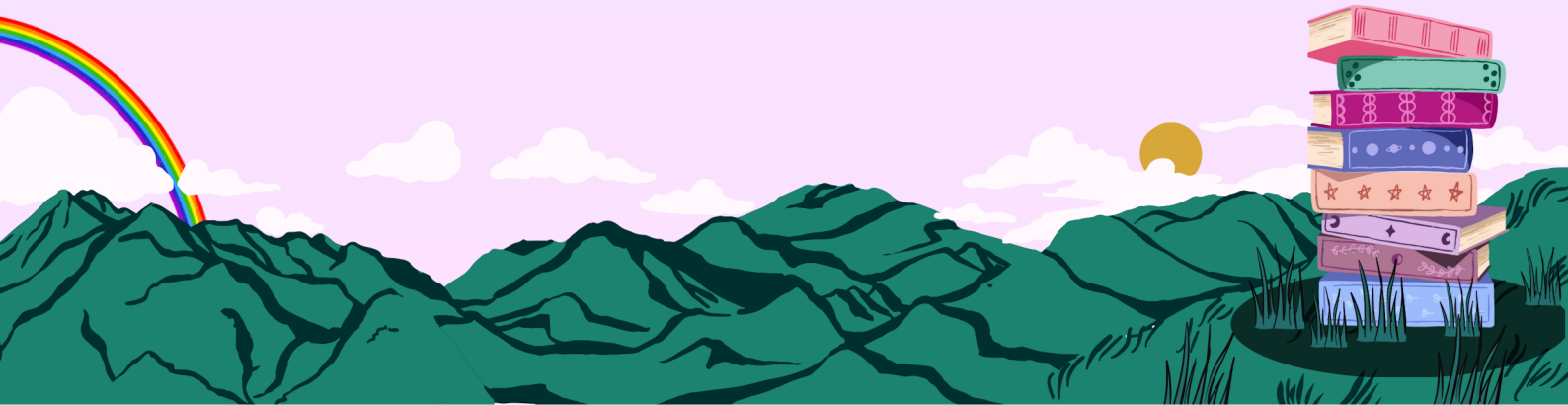
"I did."

"Oh, thank heavens. If I have to eat any more artificial sugar, I will probably die. It's in everything now."

Sam grins and pulls out a wrapped package from the bag. We sit down on the grass, two opposite girls from two opposite nations finding peace in between.

"Close your eyes," Sam says playfully, starting off our usual game. "Right, now, take a guess."

I inhale as Sam holds whatever food she's brought me under my nose. The sweet scents of butter, syrup, and something fruity swirl around me, and beneath that the smoky perfume of Sam's skin.



“A pastry of some kind...peach? No, apricot!”

“Correct!”

I open my eyes to find Sam twinkling down at me, her face inches from mine. The proximity sets my heart pounding, hammering away like it’s trying to burst out of my chest. “Mila,” she murmurs, and I feel myself blush.

“Sam,” I whisper guiltily. “I really want to kiss you, but... well, the pastry!”

She pulls away, blinking, and then throws her head back laughing. “Oh, Mila, sorry. Here you go.”

I gratefully take the circle of flaky yumminess she offers and nibble at one edge, wanting to savour it. It’s better than anything I’ve had back home, made of real ingredients and not lab-grown nothings.

“Mmm,” I sigh when I take a bite of the juicy apricot baked into the middle.

Sam leans back on her hands. “Pastries are the third party in this relationship, aren’t they?”

I peek over the top of the pastry and nod vigorously. Sam laughs again, and I want to listen to the sound of it for the rest of my life.

It’s so easy to lose track of time with Sam. Especially because the dusky sky of the InBetween never changes.

We sit at the base of the willow tree, watching the breeze ruffle the grass, our fingers twined together. My hand looks so pale in hers, nearly paper-



white. I suppose that's what happens if you spend your life in a city where it's always night. Not that I really have much choice.

"When is it going to happen?" I ask quietly, dreading the answer.

"They'll attack in less than forty-eight hours."

I tip my head onto her shoulder, my eyes stinging with unshed tears. "And there's nothing we can do?"

"No." Her voice sounds so hollow, like all of the sunlight has been sucked out of her.

"We'll find each other again," I say, tightening my fingers around hers.

Sam just stares off at the hazy white edges of the InBetween in silence. She never replies.

Two night-cycles later, I watch from the window of my living room as the border comes down. It buckles and twists, blooms with splotches of colour, a writhing monster reluctant to give up the people it has held captive for years. And when it finally dissipates, I watch as light, beautiful, sweet, hopeful light, pours in, and the skies flood with pink.

I smile as, over the city, dawn breaks.

