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Opening extract from
Out There

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Prologue

“Ava!” I yelled up the stairs even though I knew it was in vain; she was still missing. “Where is that girl?”

I rubbed my forehead and wandered into the kitchen. My whole body was exhausted, with fatigue, but also worry. I hadn’t had a wink of sleep because I knew that finding Ava was my top priority. I walked over to the sink and poured myself a glass of water.

Inside I was terrified; I knew there weren’t many places to go, as our city was only so big with barely five hundred people in it, but I could only imagine that she must have fallen and banged her head and was lying unconscious somewhere. The mere thought almost made me drop my glass.

Pull it together. I drained my glass and tried to brainstorm all of the possible places Ava could have been. She wasn’t at her friends’ houses; I had already gone to each one. That was another strange thing: they all said that they hadn’t seen Ava outside school in weeks, and they used to spend every minute together. As soon as the bell rang, they said, she would be gone, as if she dropped off the face of the earth. At least she was attending.

I checked the clock: 2:20 a.m. I sighed, knowing that I had to leave for work soon, but couldn't because I had to wait for Ava to come home safely. The best thing to do was wait, she would return soon enough, and if not then I would know something was wrong. So, I busied myself organising the kitchen once, twice, and even then I wasn't happy with it.

I rearranged the closet and made sure the living room was neat before going upstairs and into my bathroom. After cleaning it thoroughly, I caught the reflection of myself in the mirror and sighed. It was unbearably obvious that I hadn't had any sleep or peace of mind. So, I took to freshening up; I washed my face three times and combed through the tangles in my hair. I thought back to the days when I put on make-up every morning and had to remind myself that those days didn't exist any more. Sometimes I wished they did.

I used to live in a time where the world was limitless and people came from all over. But my world was destroyed, and so were all the little pieces of it. I waved goodbye to trivial things like make-up and mobile phones. Not to mention something far more important.

Traces of daylight were filtering in, so I went downstairs to the kitchen to prepare breakfast, when I realised my hunger had been consumed by my worry. So instead I just sat at the counter and waited.

And in my wait, my mind wandered to other places. Often I thought about my life and what I had become: a woman with greying hair with a daughter slipping through her fingers. It was only months ago that Ava was the closest person in the world to me. Of course, it was obvious what had pulled us apart.

Then I heard something. It was the door opening. *Please be her.* I sat up straighter and waited.

She walked into the kitchen and I was so relieved to see her breathing with blood pumping through her veins that I almost leapt out of my seat and held her in my arms telling her that I loved her. But then I saw the cheesy, smiley and completely carefree expression on her face and I snapped. She had no idea that I hadn't slept or eaten or done anything but worry about her and she just waltzed in like everything was going to be OK.

My expression fixed into an icy glare and her face fell. "Welcome back Ava," was all that came out of my taut lips.

"M-mother why are you up so early?" She looked like a deer caught in the headlights.

"This is the time I normally leave, Ava. But, truth be told, I have actually been up since four a.m. yesterday." Yet at that moment I didn't feel tired. "Do you know why?"

"I can't imagine." She was holding something back and it was so obvious.

"Well, I came home from work yesterday, early in fact, and my daughter was nowhere to be found."

"I stayed over at Lexi's house. I'm sorry I forgot to tell you." I stared at her, waiting for her to tell me the truth. No such luck.

"Oh well, that makes sense," I continued. "I did actually personally visit the O'Connell's and the Samuels' and the Naumann's homes at one this morning after my daughter never turned up."

I saw her gulp. And I so badly wanted to run over and hold her close. But, I couldn't.

"You want to know what every single one of those girls told me?" I just kept pushing. "They said that they haven't seen you in weeks, except for school, and even then you're in your own world. Just what world exactly is that, Ava?"

She just stood there with no comprehension of how worried I was.

“What world is it?!”

“I’ve just had a lot on my mind.”

I sighed and walked over to her. “Ava, you need to rest. Your surgery is days away.” I began to stress the importance of her being rested so that the surgery would run smoothly, when she interrupted, “What, do you want me to sit in my room all day?”

Why was she raising her voice?

I tried to reason with her, but she just exploded, yelling at me about complete nonsense. She went off on a tangent about how I was never there for her, when I specifically remembered her acknowledging that I would be very busy if I got my new job. I pointed out that I was there for her and she knew I was, yet she still continued to stress that I wasn’t. Was she making excuses to hide the fact that she was gone all night?

“Why don’t you tell everyone the truth about men, huh?” she yelled out of nowhere.

“The what?!”

“They did more than oppress and hate and destroy and you know it!”

I stared at her like she’d lost her mind. “Where did you get such horrific ideas? Men were evil and nothing less!” It was of the utmost importance that she understood that, otherwise the consequences would have been disastrous. Nothing good came of men. That’s why they all died out.

“What’s your proof?!”

I couldn’t believe she was still on that. “Look around you! Our world was almost destroyed because all men wanted was power and money and land.”

“That’s a lie! Stop lying to me! I am much older and smarter than you think and I know that men were more than that – some were, but not all.”

Of course I knew she was mature, but some things were just better kept hidden. Ava’s utter curiosity and strong-mindedness about everything always made it so much harder to get anything through to her. I knew that of all the girls her age, she would be the one that would never understand.

Then she pulled something out of her pocket and shoved it in my face. I knew exactly what it was.

I snatched it from her, completely speechless. Holding it in my hands caused a wave of sadness and regret to flood through my body, washing away all the barriers that I had built up to withstand the raging storm I had battled so many years ago. For a moment I thought I would crumble under the memories, but instead something inside me snapped.

“HOW DARE YOU! How dare you jump to conclusions! And go through my private things!” She had no idea what it was like; she had no right to judge me. Ava hadn’t even the tiniest image of the sacrifices I made for her. Her behaviour was appalling. “And how dare you try to justify men when they almost cost you everything! Brave women fought for you to be alive and this is how you repay them!”

Her disrespect towards her liberators, who fought and fought to achieve survival during The Great Wars of the X Years, was shameful. It made me shudder and I thought back to how terrifying it was to be alive during the Wars. Everyone turning on each other, people fleeing to any sanctuary possible, and leaving nothing for anyone else. She had no idea how fortunate she was that several women joined together in the Movement

and created our city. The last city. Otherwise we would all have been dead too.

“And what about Katelyn, Mother? Did you lie about her too?!”

Then I realised why she was so upset. I tried to comfort her, but she went off again about Katelyn and started yelling that it was my fault. If only I could tell her the truth. I wanted to protect Ava so badly, but I couldn't make exceptions for her because she was my daughter. I felt so torn, and she had no idea what I was going through.

“I don't want to have the surgery.” I almost missed her say it.

“You what?”

“I'm not going to do it.”

Then the yelling started again. She threw crazy statements at me about how I didn't see the real her or hear what she was saying. If only she knew that all I wanted was to keep her safe, even if it meant distancing myself. She could never know all that I knew; it was too much for her to understand.

Then she said the one thing that a mother should never have to hear her daughter say, “You don't love me! You love what you want me to be!”

I was stung. “Ava, of course I love you.”

“How can I believe you again when all you do is lie?!”

I tried to show her that I cared, but she wouldn't stop for a minute to let me speak. Finally I had enough and even though grounding didn't exist any more either, I did it anyway.

“You, young lady, are not leaving this house, do you hear me? I will walk you to school and pick you up afterwards, apart from that you remain here. End of discussion.”

“Oh, but this is not the end of the discussion.”

She flew up the stairs in a rage and I ran after her, about to apologise, when she whipped round and said, “You know what?” Her eyes were full of hatred. “I blame you.” Then without another word she vanished into her room and slammed the door.

I stood there shocked. Slowly I walked up the stairs myself. Suddenly all my emotions welled up and I felt so awful for keeping the truth from her. But she couldn’t know about my sacrifices, for Ava wouldn’t ever see them my way. She’d never understand as much as she believed she would.

I stumbled into my room as all these heavy feelings thundered through me. For a second I stood there, trying to be the strong woman everyone expected and needed me to be. But, in the end, I couldn’t hold it any longer. I fell to my bed and for the first time in years, I cried.

Chapter One

Ava, Five Months Earlier

October 3rd Year 17 was one of the most important days of my life. Everything would be determined within the next ten minutes. I held my breath, clenched my hands and stared at the stage, paralysed. People in the crowd drifted around me and I picked out familiar faces. Of course every face was familiar in some way; no one there was new to me. The buzz of the audience was building yet I only heard a muffled sound.

The announcer began to take her place on stage and the sound filtered out, leaving only the thump of my heartbeat in my ears. She carried in her hand a perfect white envelope that dictated my fate. Well, perhaps not *my* fate exactly, but the effect on me was greater than that on most of the people there.

She strolled up to the microphone, another familiar face, and leaning in close she said, “Welcome everyone to the seventh Election for Leader of the Council.” The audience applauded and she continued, “Today we will be announcing the results of the votes that have been tallied here today and we thank you all for participating.”

The campaign of a candidate lasted a total of three days in Emiscyra, our city. On the first day, candidates had to declare that they were interested in running by presenting their principles to the current Council who then decided if they would back them or not. If a candidate had the support of the Council, they would speak at the school and try to win votes from the under-eighteens. They then each spoke at the Election so the rest of the community could decide whom to vote for. Every member of the community then voted thirty minutes later.

Once the voting began, and the under-eighteens were called first, I appeared at the desk in a flash, giving my name before they even asked. Taking the touchpad in my hands, there was not a single moment of hesitation as I typed in *candidate 7B*. After that, all I could do was hope that my one little vote was not alone.

The announcer continued, “Whoever is elected Leader today will hold the great responsibility of supporting our community and leading it through whatever may come. They will hold one of the highest honours and shall be respected by all of us for their commitment and effort. They will follow a long line of Leaders who all played a tremendous role in shaping our community. So now please join with me in welcoming our candidates.”

The knot in my stomach grew as the three candidates took their places on stage. The first on was Meredith Dale. She seemed very warm and committed to the job, yet I couldn't help but feel she didn't quite grasp how great the responsibility was. She had served on the Council for the past three years as Leader of Education, voted for by the students only. She smiled and waved as she walked forward and the audience applauded.

Next on came Donna Hart. Her face was etched with wisdom, yet she had not a single wrinkle. Her speech earlier was golden and she was one of the most talented speakers I'd seen. She had served on the Council for the past twelve years in roles ranging from Member for Produce Production to Leader of Interrelations. She walked on confidently and elegantly.

The third on was Fiona Turner. Her speech was well delivered and she had many great ideas, yet her enthusiasm lacked. She had no history on the Council and had only just graduated, specialising in politics. However, her mother was the fifth Leader and did a fabulous job. Everyone expected Fiona to follow in her mother's footsteps. She walked on to the stage; her youth compared to the others was glaring.

The announcer applauded the candidates, thanking them for volunteering for such an overwhelming yet rewarding task.

Silence.

She gently opened the envelope. For a moment everything stopped. No movement. No sound. Just that rapid thumping of my heart. When I looked back, I was thankful it didn't burst out of me altogether.

She slipped out a tiny piece of paper. *How could something so small hold something so big?* She waved it in the air and the audience laughed.

Couldn't laugh, couldn't think, couldn't breathe.

She took a deep breath and opened the folded paper.

Two words. Just two words meant everything.

"And the seventh Council Leader is..."

The pause. The painful pause that made me dizzy with nerves. The silence was too great. I wanted to scream to destroy it. But then she opened her mouth...

"...Donna Hart!"

Cheers escaped the crowd and the silence was gone. It took a moment for the words to reach me. Then I heard them loud and clear: “Donna Hart, Donna Hart.” I let out a wild cheer, screaming and clapping until my throat was sore and my hands numb. Donna was grinning from ear to ear as she hugged each candidate in turn and received their congratulations. She strolled up to the stage and hugged the announcer too, then went over to the microphone.

“Thank you all.”

The crowd cheered her more and I could barely feel my hands. I was sure my cheers could be heard over every other sound.

Donna leant into the mic. “I want to thank you all for giving me this honour and I intend to make sure your support is not in vain. First I want to applaud Meredith and Fiona for their gallant efforts, which I hope don’t go unsung. And thank you for all the support I have received as it means the world to me. Also a special thanks to my own daughter Ava, who has stood by me through all the late-night speech writing and re-writing sessions, the nerves and excitement, and for saying ‘I understand’ every time I told her how much winning would change things. Ava, thank you.” She reached her hand out into the crowd as a symbol of appreciation.

Just as she said that, a bright light entered my vision and I could barely see anything. Confused, I lifted my hand to cover my eyes and to my surprise everyone in the crowd was applauding me. Donna was smiling at me and she mouthed, “Thank you, Ava.” The spotlight was shining down on me and I mouthed back, “You’re welcome, Mother.”

The audience turned back to the stage as my mother continued, “You have my word that under my leadership our community will flourish, and your needs will be fulfilled. My

determination is strong, but our community is stronger, and I have no doubt in my mind that we shall continue to develop so that our children's children can lead lives as fortunate as ours and be free of the poor judgment that once plagued our city. And on that note, I could not be more thrilled that I shall be leading us into the most highly anticipated phase of our development." The crowd cheered. "From the Analysis Phase and Re-Organisation Phase initiated by the First Leader, to the Infrastructure Development Phase, to the Education and Motivation Phase, to the Community Strengthening Phase, to now. Now I am proud to lead us in the Repopulation Phase."

The audience cheered and people turned to their neighbours to chatter about their excitement. A warm sense of pride filled me to know I might be part of it.

"This honour I have been dreaming of for many years now and to know it is finally here brings me great pride. So, thank you all again and as you have put your faith in me, I shall do everything I can to fulfil your expectations. Thank you."

The audience applauded her and the announcer stepped forward and said, "Now we shall transfer Leadership with The Oath, written by our liberators as a promise for us all to keep." The sixth Leader, Jemima Hewitt, walked on to the stage and shook hands with my mother. She then walked over to the microphone.

Silence again. This time it was for respect, and maybe secretly for a chance to breathe in the moment, a moment of history.

Jemima began, "I, Council Leader, can rightfully say that my duties to my community have been fulfilled. I have followed through with my promises, represented my city with honour, and helped us to prosper. I have been fair, I have been honest, I have been thoughtful, I have been a good example, and I have

been true. I now hand over my responsibility to my successor, Donna Hart.” She stood to the side and Donna came forward.

More silence. However, I felt it growing on me. Once a state of waiting, then a state of knowing something wonderful was to come.

Mother said with a strong voice, “I, Donna Hart, promise that I will fulfil my duties to my community. I will follow through with my promises, represent my city with honour, and help us to prosper. I will be fair, I will be honest, I will be thoughtful, I will be a good example, and I will be true. I now accept responsibility from my predecessor, Jemima Hewitt.”

The announcer then walked forward and indicated for us all to repeat our section of The Oath. A collective body and a collective voice rang out, “We, the people, promise that we will fulfil our duties to our community and support our Leader as long as she obeys her Oath. We will represent our city with honour. We will be fair, we will be honest, we will be thoughtful, we will be kind, and we will be true. We promise this in honour of our liberators, who fought to keep our race and our gender alive when we were threatened by the faults of men. Long live the women of Emiscyra.”

The Oath was thought to have supernatural powers. Whenever it was said, it bound people together and they instantly felt connected to each other. In that moment, I honestly believed that it was powerful, as the strong energy vibrated through the air.

All the faces – so familiar, so united – applauded as our new Leader descended from the stage and everyone dispersed to enjoy the celebrations.



The Town Hall was beautifully decorated for the occasion. Elections always brought on an excuse to add a little sparkle to the plain wooden walls. The most extreme decorations always came on Liberation Day, once a year. Truth be told, decorations were rare, because in Emiscyra we lived simple lives and never bought anything that was not a necessity or for a special occasion.

So the bright glittering lights and colourful banners were always a surprise to everyone at first. But the members of the community understood that they would be packed away that night and left to collect dust in a cardboard box for another three years, so we all might as well enjoy them while they lasted.

I found myself scanning the walls for a different type of streamer from usual or a new addition to the collage of colour. It was my sixth Election, and my first I attended at the age of two. The layout was always the same: same decorations, same entertainment, same food selection. Perhaps the fact that the same group of women always organised it had a part to play in the outcome. Nevertheless, it was a wonderful, perfect day. Giving up on finding anything new, except for the flowers, I decided to go and find my mother.

As I wound my way through the crowd, I was congratulated by a few familiar faces that must have recognised me from the blinding spotlight and special thank you. Finally, a flash of flawless jet-black hair caught my eye and I was soon right behind my mother, who spun round as I came up. She smiled at me and wrapped her strong thin arms around my waist and whispered in my ear, “We did good, sweetheart.”

I hugged her back and said, “Congratulations Mother, I knew you could do it. I’m just so glad it’s finally over, I didn’t think I’d make it any longer before passing out.”

“Oh darling, it’s so comforting to know you care so much. What would I do without you?”

The group of ladies she was standing with smiled at us and I recognised Georgina O’Connell, my neighbour, and Sylvia Carter, Leader of Technology on the Council for the past seventeen years, among them.

“You must be very happy for your mother,” one of the women said.

“Yes, I am. I’m Ava by the way.”

“Oh yes, we all know how your mother has wanted this for some time and I can certainly say that her winning makes me very happy, don’t you agree?” Sylvia said to me with her classic, serious, almost icy face.

“Of course, she deserves it more than anyone.” I looked Sylvia right in the eye as I said this. She flicked a lock of grey hair off her shoulder and gave me her signature icy smile in return.

“Oh Ava, please,” Mother sighed modestly.

“It’s true though. There is no one better for the job than you and I’m so happy for you for getting what you’ve always wanted.”

Mother smiled at me just as I spotted Jennifer Rose amongst the women.

“Jennifer,” I said to her, “do you know where Katelyn is? I’ve been trying to find her, actually.”

“I think she already went backstage to get ready,” she replied warmly.

“Oh thanks. Mother, is it all right if I go? I’ll catch up with you later.”

“Yes, Ava, of course. In fact, I’ll probably have a few things to do later so how about I meet you back at home after the celebration, OK?”

“OK. Congrats again,” I said, walking towards the stage.

She waved me goodbye and turned back to her friends. Some women I recognised from the restaurant by school were already on stage, singing and playing a keyboard piano. Entering the backstage door, I soon spotted Katelyn. She wasn't hard to find with her signature blonde curls and rosy cheeks. Not to mention, she was probably one of the smallest people in the room. I watched as she carefully pulled out her precious guitar from its case and leant it against the wall. She stared at it with her hands on her hips – a sign I knew meant she was contemplating something.

Taking her pause as an opportunity to go over, I snuck up behind her and placed my hands over her eyes. “Guess who?” I teased.

“Ava,” she said, giggling and turning round, “don't you think that's getting a bit old?”

“Whatever do you mean?”

“I'd know my best friend anywhere, silly.”

“Oh right, I guess I forgot about that,” I joked.

She playfully hit me on the arm and said, “Hey, help me with this will you?” She nodded at the guitar.

“Sure. What happened to it this time?”

“Well, I just got it back from repairs and it looks different to me, don't you think?”

I inspected the guitar for a second. “Oh, yeah, I can see it. There's a speck of dust on it, right there.”

“Ava! Seriously, something's different.”

“Katelyn, it looks fine, trust me.”

“Well, OK. This is an antique so I just want to be sure. People don't play music like before, you know they once didn't have auto-tuners so they had to sit there and tune them themselves.

And they used to actually have people whose profession was to play music; it wasn't just a skill. And they..."

"Katelyn, I know, you've told me this a million times..."

"Oh sorry, it's just that..."

"...music is something that is going extinct and it's important to keep the culture alive," I finished.

"You know me too well."

"Wasn't that obvious before? So, are you on next?"

"Yeah, they asked me to play again this year, shocker. I feel like every Election and Liberation Day they have the same celebration."

"Well, you know how they like tradition."

"Yeah, but it makes the music boring. If you hear the same thing all the time then..."

"... you learn to hate it. You know you've said all this before, right?"

"Well, at least I know you were listening to me all this time."

"Hey, I can be a good listener too."

"Uh-huh. Oh, congrats for your mother by the way."

"Thanks, I was so relieved."

"Yeah, I know how much she wanted it, so I'm really happy for her."

"Well, now the hard work begins. She told me that if she won, it would be a big commitment."

"That makes sense; she does have the most important job in the whole city. But, if anyone can do it, it's Donna Hart."

"True, she is tough as a rock."

"Yeah, she's like you."

"You think?"

Mother and I shared the same glossy black hair – hers is straight, mine's wavy – and the same periwinkle blue eyes. Most people said we had the same nose and face shape too.

“Ava, no one is stronger than you,” Katelyn said and her golden brown eyes lit up like they did whenever she smiled. “All right, time to go on.”

“Good luck.”

“Yeah, sure,” she sighed. “Wait a minute, I have an idea.”

“This better not involve me...”

“Come on *with* me!” she exclaimed.

“Oh no, remember last time we tried to sing together in public? Not pretty.”

“Ava, that was like two years ago. It’ll be fun! Please?”

“No, you’re fabulous enough on your own.”

“That’s not the point, I want you to come with me. It’ll be a hit, the Leader’s daughter singing her heart out on stage!”

“No way, you didn’t say anything about organs leaving the body.”

“Ava! *Please.*”

I stared at her with my *no way can you change my mind* face, but it didn’t work. Her puppy-dog eyes were impossible to resist. And before I knew it, my feet were firmly planted on the stage floor, mic in hand.

Suddenly silence wasn’t comforting any more. I tried to push away the flutter in my stomach, but the butterflies seemed to have a mind of their own.

“Hi, I’m Ava and this is...” The lights turned on, blocking my vision once again. Squinting away the brightness, I continued, “Uh thanks. So like I was saying, I’m Ava and this is Katelyn.” Katelyn waved. “And we’re going to perform for you.”

There was a moment of awkward silence, then the audience clapped. *Showtime.* I gave Katelyn my *you owe me* stare and adjusted the microphone in the stand. Taking a deep breath, I indicated to her that I was ready to start. She began to strum a

melody and the gorgeous sound of Katelyn's old and precious guitar danced around the room.

The song was a classic from the early days of the city. Back then there was a woman named Naomi who wrote new music, as all records of old songs and tunes had been destroyed in The Great Wars. She created bright happy melodies with lyrics that told of our people's struggle for freedom and what our society had become. Then she became sick and passed away before the city's second anniversary. After that people only sang her songs – good thing there were dozens of them. She was also the last person in the city to die of a disease, said to have been a birth defect. Apart from her, and a woman who died of old age, everyone since the start of the city was still alive.

Katelyn was playing one of her favourites and I saw the crowd nod their heads before the lyrics even began. As my cue came, I opened my mouth and sang. I could barely hear myself over the thump of my heart, a very busy organ that day, and it took me a moment to realise that no one else could hear me either. I stopped and turned to Katelyn with wide eyes just as she stopped strumming her guitar. I looked out over the crowd of people all standing there expectantly and my face began to heat up.

I tapped the microphone. "Testing, testing." Some people in the front row seemed to understand, but beyond that there was pretty much silence. A few yawns, maybe a whisper or two.

"Katelyn!" I hissed. "It's not working!"

She didn't seem to have any ideas so I spun round and clutched the microphone between my sweaty hands. "Testing, testing. Hello?" I yelled out into the crowd, "Anyone know how to turn this on? Hello?" My last word suddenly sounded much louder and the audience began to cheer.

“It’s working!” I turned to Katelyn.

“Start again?”

“Yeah, let’s rock!”

She began to play once again and the people nodded their heads to the beat. With a bit more confidence the second time, I sang out the lyrics into the fully functional microphone. Then Katelyn joined in at the chorus and the crowd got really into it. Some began to cheer, others clapped with the beat until everyone was clapping along. Comforted by this, I continued singing and began to sway with the music, enjoying every note. As the chorus came around again I clapped my hands above my head and grabbed the microphone off the stand, dancing around the stage. I could feel Katelyn laughing, so I went all out. The crowd were laughing and dancing and singing along. As the last lyrics came I pointed the microphone into the crowd and they all leant in to sing. The last chord rang and the audience cheered us.

Laughing, I skipped over to Katelyn. “OK, I think I’m totally worn out now, your turn.”

“All right, but you’re coming on afterwards for the finale.”

“If you insist.” I flopped into her chair panting, as she walked up to the front of the stage.

Katelyn lowered the microphone and the audience chuckled as she moved it about a foot lower. Sitting on a stool, she began to pick a gentle melody, soft and slow, like a breeze that drifted through the room and stroked the heart of each person. She began to sing. Her voice was like that of an angel, the sweetest most beautiful sound that captured the attention of everyone there. The song was not well known, but I had heard my dear friend sing it all the time. She had said it was

called *The Choice*. The audience was captivated as the oh-so-familiar lyrics rang out:

*One choice may be safe,
But in truth it brings pain,
Live for what I love,
Or live to gain?*

*Would risking it all,
Give me peace of mind?
When defying the rules,
Ends up costing my life.*

I liked to think of her voice as being as soft as rose petals. For when she sang, like a rose in full bloom, you couldn't help but stare. And as the song ended, it almost broke my heart to hear the sound of her voice fading. Then it was silent. A beautiful silence, though. A silence to appreciate and hold on to the last bit of something beautiful. Then the biggest cheer imaginable erupted from the audience and I saw Jennifer Rose smiling at Katelyn with love and pride. Right then, I would have been the proudest person in the world too if my daughter could create something as beautiful as that.

Katelyn came over. "Now, are you ready to wow them all?"

"Trust me, I don't think it's possible to wow them any more than that."

"Trust *me*, they won't believe their eyes when the dynamic duo take the stage."

"All right then, one more song."

That was an understatement. There were four more songs actually, each one louder and wilder and more exciting than the previous. Katelyn played that guitar until her fingers were

red and both of us could barely speak as we stumbled off the stage laughing.

“That was incredible!” she exclaimed, clutching my shoulder for balance.

“Who knew we had so much talent?” I giggled, slumping on to the floor.

Katelyn mimed my dancing around the stage, flipping her hair and stomping her feet. She collapsed on to the floor laughing.

“Hey, I dance way better than that.”

“Yeah, remember this.” She stood up and slid across the floor on her knees with her hands in the air.

“Ha ha, very funny.”

She laughed and fell back on the floor. “And you didn’t want to come on.”

“Don’t give me an *I told you so* or I’ll have to mimic you at the school party two years ago.”

“Now that was some crazy dancing.”

We took a moment to reminisce before I broke the silence. “Hey Kay, want to sleep over at my place?”

“Won’t your mother want time with you?”

“Nah, she said she’d be out late, so it’s fine. We can sleep in the yard...”

“You’re so lucky, my house doesn’t have a yard to sleep in.”

“So, that’s a yes?”

“Fine,” she said, laughing.

I stood, holding my hand out to her and pulled her up. After her most precious belonging was packed away, we went outside and walked to the tram stop.



At my house, we went and gathered some blankets from the cupboard and laid them on the dry grass in the yard. Katelyn borrowed sleeping clothes and we climbed into our homemade outdoor beds.

Our sky in Emiscyra was always dark at night, projected by the Bubble. The Bubble was one of the many inventions of Sylvia Carter, designed to keep out harmful gases and wild animals that lived outside the city. It was a thin layer that spread across the city edges and curved above it. Sunlight triggered a clear blue sky to be projected, and darkness triggered a black night sky. This piece of pure genius was marvelled at and immediately promoted Sylvia Carter to the smartest woman in Emiscrya. She was practically an idol.

Sleeping in the yard meant that we could stare at the curved ceiling of the Bubble. It was always visible at night, never in the day.

“I wonder how that works,” I said.

“How what works?” Katelyn asked, lying on the ground.

“The Bubble. How is it that you can see it at night, but not in the day?”

“I don’t know,” she puzzled. “You know before the Bubble people had to always be careful of looking into the sun. We’re lucky that the Bubble doesn’t show the sun but lets its rays through.”

“What does the sun look like?”

“I think it’s a glow in the sky. People are a moth to its flame, they can’t not stare at it, but it hurts their eyes if they do.” She turned to her side. “Are you excited for graduation?”

“It’s like a year away, but yeah, I guess. I can’t believe we’re almost done, all fifteen years of school.”

"I know, it's so strange. Before you know it we'll be assigned our own houses and intercoms and then we'll have to apply for a profession and receive income from the Council and everything!"

"We already get income, though."

"Yeah, but not adult-rate income. Hey, remember when our income went to our mothers to use to raise us and we didn't get to use it until age ten?"

"Who could forget? I mean I still give Mother a share of my income to buy food for me, but I know what you mean. And we get our eighteenth birthday bonuses soon!" I exclaimed, sitting up.

"Yeah, in like nine and a half months," she sighed.

"Still, we're almost eighteen! How weird!"

"I know. We're amongst the last people to graduate. After the year below us, that's it. No more kids."

"Well, I guess that's what the Repopulation Phase is for," I said, lying back down again.

"Do you think we'll be part of it?"

"I hope so, it would be a huge honour."

"Can you ask your mother?"

"She said that if she won, she wouldn't be able to tell me Council announcements before they tell the whole community."

"That makes sense."

The Bubble was so clear in the sky, like a covering over us. A protection. A mystery. In a way, it was a blindfold from the outside.

"What do you think it's like outside the Bubble?" I asked Katelyn.

"Full of wild animals and completely fogged up by gases. You know the robots that collect resources and build do it outside the Bubble."

“Imagine life before it. What do you think it was like?”

“You mean when men still existed?”

“Yeah, when there were two genders and no Bubble.”

“Well, you know...”

And she was right, I knew all too well that men ruled with an iron fist and oppressed women. They were all evil and the world was a terrible place to live in. There was suffering, disease, cruelty, poverty, starvation and pollution. Then there were The Great Wars and the men almost killed the entire human race in their foolishness. I had heard it so many times that it practically recited itself inside my head. But for some reason I always asked anyway, maybe because some part of me didn't want to believe that such devastation could be possible.

“Yeah, I know.” I wriggled in my sleeping bag. “Men equal evil.”

“Well, it's true.”

“Do you really think it's true?”

“Of course it is.” She looked at me with a confused expression. “You don't?”

“Well, they did say history in the past had been exaggerated or changed and that's why they didn't preserve any of the old texts. So, I just thought...”

“You're crazy, Ava.”

“I know.”

Katelyn laughed. “I think we should sleep now, all that dancing took up all my energy.”

“Hey, it was me that was doing the hard core dancing, so really I should call the shots about sleep time.”

“Goodnight Ava.” Katelyn giggled and rolled over.

“Night.”

Soon her gentle snores could be heard in the silence of the night. I stared at the Bubble ceiling and removed it with my mind, trying to envision what it would have been like without it. But I realised a real night sky was something I had never seen and no matter how hard I imagined, I would never know what it was like outside.

Outside.

What was it like outside?

I used to think that question would never be answered.