

ONCE AT MIDNIGHT

by Ashley Poston


QUIRK BOOKS
PHILADELPHIA

I quickly pull the curtain closed again and take a deep breath through my nose.

“There are monsters on the street,” I mumble, more to myself than anyone else.

Gail laughs softly. “They’re just excited to see you.”

“And I’m very excited to see them—but not tonight. It’s not going to rain, is it? Should I bring an umbrella? Murder-crimson or *Darkwing Duck*?” I add, pulling two more choices of ties out of my suitcase.

My manager sighs and closes her phone. She stands, and comes over to me, and turns me back to face the mirror. She’s shorter than I am—barely comes up to my shoulder—but her curly red hair gives her enough height to leverage it out. “Darien Freeman,” she says as she makes us both stare into our awkward reflections, “Elle doesn’t care what you wear. You can go in your pajamas. It’s not going to matter.”

“It’s a first date. Of *course* it matters!”

She gives me a meaningful look.

I cave. “Okay, she might forgive me if I wore my *Starfield* pajamas.” I cock my head. “Or if I was naked. You know, I saw this list on the internet—”

“Aaaand this conversation is over,” she quickly interrupts me, letting go of my shoulders. The thing is: I know Gail’s right. Elle *won’t* care if I show up in pajamas or a golden tux. She doesn’t care what kind of baggage I come with, or what my lifestyle entails, or the paparazzi, or the long months away on location, or my sometimes-shoddy cell reception. But *I* care. This is our first date, even though we’ve already been “dating” for a few months, but because of the timing of reshoots for *Starfield* I couldn’t actually

take her out on a date right after ExcelsiCon. Which bummed both of us out. Then with post-production and school starting and things with my dad . . .

I look at the two ties as if my life depended on it. “I want tonight to mean something, you know? I don’t want to screw it up.”

Gail replies, “I don’t think you could, Dare.”

“But what about . . .” I motion toward the window, down to the fans waving signs that say I WANT TO WABBA WABBA WITH YOU and WILL YOU MARRY ME? and CARIMINDOR FOREVER.

She waves me off. “It’ll be fine. We’ve been over the plan. I’ll fake out the paparazzi, and you’ll sneak her out of the house, and you two will have a *grand* time—”

There’s a knock on the door and Gail jumps about a foot in surprise.

“Oh! That has to be Lonny. He’s a wee late,” she adds, checking her watch. She answers the door, and my bodyguard steps into the room. He takes up almost the entire doorway, tall and broad shouldered and intimidating in the way Terry Crews is intimidating when he doesn’t have his yogurt on *Brooklyn 99*. But I know the truth: he likes collecting stuffed turtles and records the soap opera *Passions* every day. And I’ve survived these last few months of needy paparazzi and overly enthusiastic fans because he’s a really, really good bodyguard. And friend. And stand-in Dad-figure, since my own Dad kinda went MIA after I fired him as my manager. He’s somewhere in London right now with my mom, trying to rekindle their marriage, and I’m rooting for him. But based on the text messages I’m getting from my mom—“Ugh, he brought me flowers again” and “Darien, your father BOUGHT A DOG and I don’t know what to do with him”—it isn’t going very well.

I already feel better now that Lonny is here. “Purple or red?” I ask him, holding up the ties.

He motions to Gail. “Can you give us a few minutes?” he asks gently, and she nods and scurries out of the room.

When she’s gone, I sigh and toss the ties back into my suitcase. “You didn’t have to send her away to tell me I have bad tastes in ties—”

“I’m quitting.”

I stare at him, uncomprehending. Did he just . . . did I just . . . “You’re—what?”

He rubs the back of his neck and clears his throat. “My partner and I are going to take over a security business in Atlanta. He’s moving there next week.”

“Next . . . *week*?”

“Tonight’s the last night I’ll be here,” he goes on. “My contract ended a few months ago, but I stayed on because Gail asked and because you’re a good kid, Darien. I’m sorry this is sudden.”

To the point, as always.

My arms drop to my sides, and beneath me it feels like an abyss opens, the Black Nebula itself, to swallow me whole. “But—but what about tonight? You said you’d coach me! I even found an app where I can stick my wireless buds in one ear and you can—”

He holds up a pair of keys. “Got you the best ride for the best girl.”

I stare at the keys. “Alone?”

He nods. “Alone.” Then he takes another look at my ties and says, “The blue one.”

“But isn’t it the wrong shade?”

“The blue one,” he repeats. “If Carmindor wears it, it’s never the wrong shade.”



THIS DATE IS GOING TO BE A DISASTER MOVIE.

I stare out the bathroom window at the three black SUVs parked down the end of my street. Paparazzi, although with those vehicles they look like they should be part of something cooler. Like the *Men in Black*, or S.H.I.E.L.D.

Okay, so, it's not that I *hate* paparazzi.

I just really, really, *really* hate the thought of them snapping a photo of me tonight. They always seem to get my bad side—and I've come to figure out that *every* side is my bad side. It's like the camera finds that one millisecond where my face looks like Jabba the Hut got flattened by a steamroller and snaps the photo like, NAILED IT.

And I really don't want to have *another* editorial about me in some trash-star magazine, picking at my clothes or the way I wear my hair. I've never really been one for social media—aside from my blog—so there isn't much else for journalists to sift through. They can pick apart my posts all they want, but they can never do worse than my seventh-grade English teacher. Mrs. Cannon was

a soul-sucking dementor. I still shiver at the mention of *dangling participles*.

But still, what if a paparazzo snaps a photo of me tonight in a dress I had to borrow from Sage, and the world deems me unworthy *again*? What if I am? What if I'm not pretty enough for—

“Stop it,” I tell my reflection in the bathroom mirror, and I turn off the faucet.

Cal, my stepsister, knocks on the door. “Elle? Are you okay in there?”

“Oh just peachy,” I call back, even though I want to puke.

“I hope you're not messing up the eyeliner I did,” comes the nasally voice of my other stepsister, Chloe.

I say nothing, but give my face another once-over. I didn't ruin her makeup—my face just looks green. I breathe out through my nose and in through my mouth to calm my anxiety. It totally doesn't help.

“He'll be here soon,” Cal adds, and I detect a knot of nerves bunched in her voice.

He.

Darien.

Darien Freeman.

The Darien Freeman, with his perfect curly hair and perfect brown skin and perfect jawline and perfectly long black eyelashes framing his perfectly meltable eyes—

“You can't stay in there forever,” Cal adds.

“Actually, she can. *I'll* go on a date with Darien instead.”

“Shush, Chloe, you aren't helping.”

“Whatever.”

I hear Chloe stomp away from the door, muttering about this relationship being *wasted* on me, and I hate that I agree a little.

Honestly, I still don't understand how I got here—my life must've taken a wrong turn at You Are the Luckiest Girl Alive Avenue, and I feel like somehow I've hoodwinked *everyone*. Because I'm not lucky. I'm not the kind of girl everyone wishes they could be. I'm the kind of girl who wishes she could be everyone else.

"Elle? Don't listen to her," Cal says. "Chloe's still mad that James didn't ask her to prom."

I press my forehead against the door. The wood is cool against my skin. It makes me feel a little less sick. "But what if—?"

"Not! Another! What if!" Cal cuts me off in a no-nonsense voice she must've picked up from Sage. "Now get your butt out here and go on a date with that dreamboat of a hunk who flew across the entire country just to take you out to dinner."

Which is EXACTLY THE PROBLEM. On Skype I can somewhat trick myself into thinking that this is all some elaborate joke, but in real life? It becomes, well, *real*. Whatever this thing is between Darien and me. ExclesiCon still feels like a dream, this impossibility I wished up on some wayward star. What if we're not compatible in real life?

What if—

My phone blips with the *Starfield* incoming message sound, and it makes my heart skip. I glance at my phone on the counter.

—AH'BLENA

—*Look out your window, ah'blena.*

My *window*?

"Elle, are you still—" Cal's hand is on the doorknob when I wrench it open and barge past her toward my room. My heart is thundering in my ears, bright and happy and hopeful. It's not like

I haven't seen Darien in the last few months—we Skype all the time, usually when he's exhausted after traveling or long shoots, dark circles under his eyes and his curly hair a mess, and obviously I've seen him on the cover of magazines as the press begin to gear up for the release of *Starfield*—but not in real life. I haven't seen him since the weekend of ExcelsiCon.

In two strides I'm through my tiny room and grab my galaxy curtains—and pause.

What if you aren't enough? whispers that terrible voice in my head. But then I remember that this boy—whether he ruins Car-mindor or not in the upcoming movie—likes *me*, and that's not nothing.

It's something big, and it's something earth-moving.

It's an impossible story.

And it's mine.

I yank the curtains open and look down into the yard, and like some cheesy '80s rom-com, there he is in our backyard, holding a bouquet of colorful wildflowers, smiling that crooked smile with the kind of look that makes my heart flutter.

Cal, leaning on the doorframe, pushes up her purple glasses and asks, “So, are you gonna go or what?”

I spin back to her, Darien's smile so infectious that I'm smiling, too. “Man the guns, Euci, we're sailing into the abyss!”

She gives me a blank stare. “I've no idea what that means.”

“Time for you to distract the paparazzi.”

She grins. “Perfect.”

fidged with a curl of her hair, twisting it around her finger, and I really wished Lonny had been in my ear telling me what to say. Smiling and looking debonair is one thing, but actually making small talk was a feat I'd yet to master. I hoped Elle didn't think I would miraculously be like my character on *Seaside Cove*.

My stomach was a ball of knots by the time we reached the restaurant, and the valet quickly parked the car while we hurried inside. We got the table at the far end of the restaurant, away from the windows. No one had recognized us. Good. Just make like Keanu Reeves and blend into the scenery.

Elle sits across from me in this immaculate white restaurant, looking . . . so beautiful. She's wearing a dark blue dress, her hair pinned up into a thick braid behind her head, clasped with—a *Starfield* pin. Of course.

She keeps her eyes trained down onto her menu and pushes her black glasses up the bridge of her nose. She glances at me. Embarrassed that she caught me looking at her, I drop my eyes to the entrees. I've already read the menu a hundred times before this date. I know what I'll get. If she has a salad, I'll also get a salad—unity! If she gets a steak, I'll get the filet mignon with a side of sweet potato and—

She folds her menu and places it down in front of her, frowning.

I quickly do the same. "Is something wrong? Do you not like the menu?" And then I realize, "Are you allergic to—"

"It's so expensive," she says softly.

I blink, surprised, and glance down at the prices. *Oh*. I hadn't even realized. Then I notice that she's looking at the different forks and knives and spoons, pushing them around a little, and my stomach twists because she's uncomfortable. "Is it . . . not okay?"

“Oh no, it’s fine! This is great!” She gives me a paper-thin smile. “Honestly, I’ve always wanted to try escar—*paparazzi*?”

“I didn’t see that on the—” I begin, but she quickly reaches over the table and brushes her fingers over mine. My heart slams into my ribcage. My eyes glance up to lock onto hers, but she’s staring over my shoulder.

There’s a window behind me.

And that means . . .

“There’s paparazzi in the window, isn’t there,” I say, and she nods.

Of course there are. Of *course*. My hands curl into fists, and she covers mine with hers so the paparazzi can’t see. The first time we hold hands on our first date, and it has to be when she’s trying to discreetly tell me there are photographers ruining our dinner plans.

“It’s not that bad,” Elle says, giving the window another look. “There are only a few of them . . .”

She trails off as our server returns, clutching a notepad. Or at least I think she’s a server, until I realize the notepad has my face and the *Starfield* logo on it, and the girl isn’t wearing the slim black suit that every other server is, but jeans and a blouse. I realize a second too late, before I can angle my face away.

The girl gasps. “It *is* you! Darien Freeman!”

I smile at her—and it’s genuine. I’m grateful for my fans. I just sort of wish they practiced self-control sometimes. “Yes I am. And you are?”

“Like, the *biggest* fan! I love *Seaside Cove* so much!” She shoves the notebook toward me. “Can I have an autograph and a selfie?!”

My smile strains. If I say yes, then I'm sure to cause some sort of commotion, and if anyone else wants a signature or a selfie I'll have to honor them, too, and then I'll just become an unwanted attraction in this four-star Michelin restaurant. That is not something that I want. But I also don't want to say no to her, either. Then she'll run out to the paparazzi and tomorrow I'll be front-page news about how I'm rude to my fans. I know I'm thinking the worst of her, but Jessica Stone has told me quite a few horror stories, and I can't get them out of my head.

"Um, actually . . ." I begin hesitantly, trying to figure out the best lie. I'm terrible at lying, but I have to do something before this entire night is ruined by—

"He can't right now," Elle chimes in for me, and the girl looks at her as if she's just noticed her.

"Ohmygod! You're *Geekerella*! I thought all of that was just news hype but—you're her! You're real!"

Elle's nose scrunches a little at the name, but she nods. "That's me." She leans over conspiratorially toward her, putting her hand to her mouth to block the paparazzi at the window from reading her lips. "And we're on a *date* right now."

Oh, no.

I stare at Elle as if a Xenomorph has just surfaced out of her chest and is doing the cha-cha down the table. It's bad enough that the paparazzi are here—but to tell random people, who might tweet it out to the universe and then bring a horde of other people and then our date will be—

The girl claps a hand over her mouth. "Oh! *OH!* Ohmygod." Then she does a strange thing: she steps away from the table. "I'm so sorry I interrupted."

“It’s our first date, actually,” Elle adds.

“First? But you’ve been an item for months!”

“Long distance is tough.”

The girl nods. “I’m dating a boy in New York. It’s hard. I’m sorry—I didn’t mean to interrupt you two. The paparazzi outside have been causing some noise and I just . . . wasn’t thinking.”

“Yeah, they tend to do that,” Elle says with a solemn nod.

“Thank you for understanding.”

The girl beams. “Of course!”

As she walks away, I glance from her to Elle, and then back to her. “You . . . how did you . . .”

Elle leans in over the table and whispers, “Okay, now’s our chance to leave.”

My eyebrows jerk up. “Leave? But where are we—*ah!*”

She takes my hand and pulls me up from the table, then leads me past the bar and toward the restrooms. I don’t know how she knows there’s an exit back this way, but there is, and we slip out and into the parking lot.

“How did they find me?” I mutter, trying to remember if I saw a car trailing us to the restaurant. I didn’t—I was very careful. I know I was.

Elle shakes her head, “I don’t know but—” She pales. “Chloe.”

“Your stepsister?”

“It’s a long story. James decided to take another girl to prom this year, so she’s been on a tirade, and just yesterday she interrupted a date with Cal and Sage and—”

“There they are!” a voice shouts, and around the corner of the restaurant come the paparazzi. Their camera flashes are blinding. I curse and dig for my keys—and remember that we valet parked the car.

Of course we did. I can't parallel park if my life depended on it. But now that also means we are . . . very much stranded without a car and those tabloid vultures swarming. This is turning into my nightmare of nightmare scenarios. This is worse than the time I had to plunge one hundred feet into an airbag with only a harness and my good looks to save me.

This was the exact thing Jessica Stone warned me about. How we can't be like normal people, because we aren't. Our jobs are in the spotlight, my entire life put on display with or without my knowledge. I'd gotten good at hiding most of myself, but I can't ask Elle to follow me into that sort of paranoia. She doesn't deserve to be hounded and chased out of a freakin' restaurant.

But Elle weaves her fingers tightly through mine and drags me between the parked cars, ducking as the paparazzi spotted us behind one, and then another—and in the brief flash of the lamp-post light, she looks like she's smiling.



ELLE

THERE IS ONLY ONE PLACE I CAN THINK OF where those cockroaches won't find us—and it's currently parked up King Street, in a side lot beside an indie bookstore. The Magic Pumpkin. It stands in the back of the shallow lot like a neon orange monstrosity, the lights inside shining gold. There isn't a line, thankfully, and a familiar shock of green hair catches my eye.

Sage looks up from her sketchbook in surprise. "Elle? *Darien?*"

"Hi, can we hide for a minute?" I ask, already wrenching open the back door of the food truck. I shove Darien in as he protests and climb up after him, closing the door behind us. I put my hand up to my lips as we hunker down by the refrigerators. The paparazzi hurry into the lot, but we're already gone.

Sage gives them the stink eye.

One of them asks, "Hey! Girl! Have you seen anyone running this way?"

She points her pen the opposite way.

"Thanks!" calls another.

She rolls her eyes. "That's *Ms. Girl*, you fool of a Took."

I wait for the footsteps to fade before I let out a sigh of relief and slump down against the door of the refrigerator. Darien has yet to move from where he squashed himself against the cabinet doors. I'm not sure if he's about to puke or just trying to figure out what that funky smell is coming from the fryer.

Sage quirks a single eyebrow at us. "So, I take it the date's going well?"

"Chloe tattled on us," I explain.

"Ah."

Darien hangs his head and pushes his fingers through his hair. "This is a disaster."

I have to agree, but . . . it isn't as bad as I thought it'd be. And we're out of that stuffy restaurant, which means I don't have to embarrass myself by not knowing which fork to use for what. One of them had to be for combing my hair, right?

Not that I can tell Darien all that. He seemed like he wanted so badly for the dinner to go well, and I felt so terrible that it didn't, and that I was glad that it didn't. I feel so much more at home in this food truck. In my element. Like Carmindor on the bridge, or Amara in boots instead of heels. In the restaurant, I thought I was going to suffocate under the pressure of whether to get a salad or that divine-sounding sirloin—

Here, there's only the smell of flash-frozen chimichangas and fried fritters and home.

Sage checks her watch. "Well, you two lovebirds can stay here as long as you want, but I've got my twenty-minute break coming up and I promised to take Cal to that new Tex-Mex place up the street." She knocks out the prop that keeps the service window open and it swings closed, then takes off her *IT'S IN THE SEEDS* apron and hangs it on a hook. "It was nice to see you again," she

says to Darien as she steps over our legs.

She swings open the back door and hops down. She glances back to me one last time and gives me a meaningful look—the kind of look that tells me I should at least console Darien—before she leaves us hunkered down on the floor of the Magic Pumpkin. I glance over at my boyfriend—he *is* my boyfriend, isn't he? We haven't really decided yet—and he looks like someone just told him his cat volunteered herself as tribute in the seventy-fourth-annual Hunger Games.

I pick myself up and dust off my dark blue dress—which matches his tie eerily well. It's the perfect shade of blue. "I'm betting we'll be here for a while," I say, and nudge my head toward the stove. "I can cook something up for us, maybe? I can't promise it won't be poisoned though."

"It's okay, I've built up an immunity to Iocane powder," he mumbles, his fingers still curled into his hair. "I just wanted to treat you to something nice."

I was just beginning to get my heart under control, and there he goes and says something like *that*. I hide a smile and squat down beside him again, putting my elbows on my knees. He really looks dejected, so I touch his shoulder lightly. He's such a Hufflepuff, and oh, I think it makes me like him even more, which I wasn't sure was possible. "I didn't think I had to point it out, but being with you *is* nice, *ab'blen*."

The nickname catches him by surprise, even though I must've texted it to him too many times to count. He finally takes his hands out of his hair—now wild in every direction—and glances up at me. "It's still weird, hearing you call me that."

"I can definitely stop—"

"Don't!" He stands and dusts off his dark designer jeans that

hug him in all of the right places, pulling me up with him. “I like it. I like you saying it.”

“What a coincidence,” I reply, taking two aprons off the hooks. I step up to him, loop one of the aprons over his head, and linger. He smells so *good*—like sandalwood and starstuff, and I’m trying not to swoon, but he’s making it incredibly difficult. “Because I like the way you call me *ah’blena*, too.”

“*Ah-blena*,” he mutters softly, drawing closer to me, tilting his head just slightly, lips parting—

His stomach grumbles. Like, *loudly*. He jerks back, mortified, and coughs in embarrassment. “Curse your sudden yet inevitable betrayal,” he murmurs at his body.

I burst into a fit of laughter, clutching my sides. “Darien, tell me the truth—have you eaten at *all* today?”

The tips of his ears blush. “I’ve—I’ve had *something*.”

“A pack of crackers doesn’t count.”

“Your beauty kept me sated.”

“Apparently not, loverboy,” I tease.

He ties on his apron. It’s definitely fit for a petite woman, not professional eye candy. “I was too nervous to eat,” he admits.

“Well then, what’re you in the mood for?”

“Surprise me,” he decides. “I’m sure everything is good.”

“Except the chimichangas.”

“What’s wrong with the chimichangas?”

I look him dead in the eyes. “You don’t wanna know.”

into hers and turn her in the direction of the theater. It's one of those old theaters with a marquee out front, lined in large bright yellow-white bulbs. The neon sign above the marquee reads THE STELLAR, like some Tardis-traveling cinema pulled straight out of the 1920s and transplanted here.

Elle reads the words on the marquee. "Oh, the sign says it's reserved tonight."

"That's because it is." I open the door and bow, flourishing my hands inside. "After you, *ah'blena*." She looks stunned but steps into the lobby, where a girl waits at the concession counter.

"Finally!" the girl cries.

"Cal?" Elle stares in surprise.

Elle's stepsister fixes her velvety-red theater hat. "Popcorn?"

Elle doesn't quite understand. "But . . . you and Sage . . ."

"You two took your sweet time," adds another voice, and Sage steps out, holding the door open. "C'mon, we got time for maybe three episodes before Toni kicks us out."

I grab a popcorn for both of us and lead Elle into the theater. It's dark and cool and deserted except for us. I take her halfway down the aisle to the best seats in the house. I am very good at picking out good theater seats. I spent most of my middle school years in dark theaters, sneaking from one movie to the next so I wouldn't have to pay; the best spots are definitely a little up from the middle row, directly in the center. I pull her into a row, and we sink into the plush seats.

She glances around the empty theater. "You . . . did this for me?"

"It's not too much, is it?" I ask, thinking back on the restaurant.

"Too much? This is so cool! I've always wanted to come here, but I never have the time and the movies here are always so

expensive. What're we going to watch?" she asks enthusiastically. "I hope we're not watching *Seaside Cove*."

I mock a gasp. "That is a great terrible show, thank you."

"Emphasis on *terrible*," she teases, and then looks back to the dark screen. "Hey, Darien?"

"Mmh?" It distracts me that she doesn't call me *ab'blen*.

"Thank you for tonight. For coming here. For sticking around." She doesn't look at me as she says this, as if she's scared that if she does it'll all be over. Really—does she think that? "This all feels like an impossible dream sometimes. I'm just kinda waiting to wake up, you know?"

"I do," I reply truthfully. I take a deep breath and continue, "But I'm not going anywhere. I like you, Danielle. I like that you cook fantastic tofurgers—"

"You know they're called tofu burgers."

"—and that you treat my fans with kindness and respect, and that you are smart and brave. I don't care that you can name every *Starfield* episode in syndication order—although I have to say it kinda turns me on. I like you, *ab'blena*."

Elle finally looks into my eyes, searching my face. "I like you, too, *ab'blen*," she whispers in reply.

The theater screen flickers to life, and the opening theme of *Starfield* triumphs through the speakers. *She likes me*, I think, my heart soaring through space as the *Prospero* flashes onto the screen. The first episode begins, and Elle and I sink into our chairs, the tub of popcorn between us, and for the first time tonight everything feels right, and I wish we could stay here forever, watching Princess Amara and Carmindor and Euci and Zorine and the Nox King fight in a universe almost as impossible as ours.

Because I don't know how long this will last. If I've learned

anything, it's that everything that begins has an end, and I don't know what sort of end our story will be.

But I find myself wishing that Elle will be in it.

As the episode credits roll, Prince Carmindor points toward the stars, one side of his lip quirking up into a grin. He folds one leg over the other. "*Look to the stars,*" he commands, and the people on the bridge slide into their seats. The thrusters hum.

I glance over at Elle as she mouths the words, a handful of popcorn halfway to her mouth, enraptured in the moment. The movie screen reflects in her glasses, and her eyes are bright behind them, lost in the moment on the bridge, her heart a thousand lightyears away in a galaxy with a dreaded Black Nebula, and steadfast Federation Princes, and impossible Noxian Princesses.

"Aim," her lips move to the sound of Carmindor's voice.

I reach down, gently, hopefully, and fold my fingers into hers. Her eyes cut away from the movie screen to our hands, and then to me. The Federation blues, caught up in the swirl of lens flares, light the side of her face in an ethereal glow. She leans into me, the popcorn tub abandoned between us, and I lean in to meet her halfway, and I kiss her as the screen spirals into a galaxy of stars.

"Ignite."



ONCE A PRINCESS

by Ashley Poston

ONCE, FOR AN ENTIRE WEEKEND, I was someone else. It was one of the most stressful weekends of my entire life. It was also when I met the most fantastic girl I've ever known.

She took my hand and she showed me who I could be if I let myself, and I still think about that a lot. The night spent eating coffeepot ramen and staring at the stars from the hotel roof, and waking up with her the next morning with her fingers intertwined in my hair.

And even when she found out that I was Jessica Stone—*that* Jessica Stone—she didn't care. I've never been good at relationships (or people, really), but for some reason Harper stuck. After that weekend, reality set in and we had to leave on different flights. We decided to do something very scary, and something very real.

Love isn't like the grand romantic gestures you see in the movies. It isn't a kiss and happily ever after, no matter how much I'd like it to be. It's late-night texts and tired calls after a long day on location, and heated arguments that end in 3 a.m. Facetimes apologizing to each other. It involves a lot of missing each other, and a lot of missing what other couples have—normalcy.

There's nothing normal about Harper and my relationship.
And I kind of don't care.

My phone buzzes, and I fish it out from an inside pocket of my costume. Amara doesn't *actually* have a phone pocket, but the director got so tired of me sticking my phone between my breasts that she ordered the costume designer to sew one in for me.

HARPER 3:36PM

—Just landed. See you soon, sunshine <3

I fight back a smile.

See you soon never hit so different.

Who would I have been if I'd never met her? If I'd never traded places with Imogen Lovelace? I certainly would never have agreed to play Princess Amara for the sequel to *Starfield*. I would've let some other naive actress reprise my role and let the screenwriters come up with some clever reason why Amara doesn't look exactly as she did before.

“Oh, it's because she's from a different universe!” maybe.

Or: “Because we all change, and Amara changed the most.”

Or even: “Remember *Face/Off*? That movie with John Travolta and Nicholas Cage? Yeah, it's like that.”

There would be memes about how *Starfield* could never keep the original Amara. The TV series replaced the actress after the pilot, and they'd replace me after the first movie. “It's the Amara Curse!” they'd say.

Well, Amara does *not* have a curse.

That I can happily confirm.

Sharon, my makeup artist, finishes gluing on my eyelashes and asks me to look at her to make sure they won't come off in the

action scenes later today. She frowns, reminding me of my agent who also frowned when I told her I *would* be reprising my role as Amara. Sharon straightens my left eyelash. “Perfect. Not even Natalia can get on me about your makeup now,” she says with a satisfied nod.

“I wouldn’t be so sure,” I reply with a laugh. The weight of the lashes makes my eyelids feel heavy and weird. It’s like having feathers glued to my eyes.

Sharon takes the Amara wig off the mannequin and tells me to bend forward so she can fit it over my tightly braided hair. Blood-red ringlets fall down my shoulders. The scenes we’re filming today are set in the Federation capital, right before the climax when Sond takes over and Amara has to save Carmindor from being brainwashed by the Nox.

Emotional stuff. High octane. I glance at my script, trying to memorize the last few lines.

“You were mine—you were always mine. You will always be mine,” Amara says as she grasps a brainwashed Carmindor on both sides of his face and tries to will him to remember. Remember them. Remember her. Remember himself.

I sort of hate how much I love this movie.

Sharon glues my wig in place and smooths the mesh across my forehead, then nods again to herself. “Okay, we’re good. Does it feel good?”

I glance into the mirror. Princess Amara stares back at me, flaming red hair coiffed into perfect curls that cascade over her shoulders. Her eyes are accented with dark purple eyeshadow, liner perfectly sharpened and winged at the edges. There are stars in her eyelashes and they glitter when I blink, and the jewels pressed into her skin shimmer when I move.

“It feels like Amara,” I reply nobly.

“That’s what we like to hear,” she says with a fist pump. “Now, go out there and knock ’em dead!”

And then I’ll see Harper—for the first time since ExcelsiCon.

It’s been months. Four months, three days, and seventeen hours, to be exact. Not that I’ve been counting—there’s an app on my phone for that.

“You all right, hon? You look pale all of a sudden,” Sharon says.

“I’m fine,” I reply, biting the inside of my cheek to keep from smiling. “I’m just . . . nervous.”

“You’ll do wonderful today,” she replies, but that’s not what I’m nervous about. Sharon pushes one last bobby pin into my hair as the door to my trailer jerks open and Ethan, my assistant, pops his head in.

“Natalia’s calling everyone on set,” he says. “You ready?”

“As I’ll ever be,” I reply, and push myself out of the chair. At least today I’m disguised as one of the Noxian soldiers, so I get to wear pants and boots and no one has to help me downstairs or across a lot. Ethan grabs one of the hooded robes from the coat rack by the door, and fixes it on me to cover up my costume—spoilers and all that—before I step out of the trailer and into the afternoon sun.

A group of fans stand at the edge of the lot. They’ve been there for the last three weeks of filming, and every day Darien has gone over there and taken selfies with them and chatted. I haven’t. They still scream and call my name, though, waiting for me to look over. I chance a smile at them and give a small wave.

They shout my name, pulling out their phones, begging me to come over and say hi.

Ethan quickly grabs me by the shoulder and shoves me toward the warehouse. “You’re just as bad as Darien,” he mutters.

Huh. I guess I’ll take that as a compliment.

“WHAT DO YOU THINK HE’S PLAYING ON HIS PHONE?” Imogen asks, leaning over the back of my chair to stare across the set at Vance Reigns. Her hair is a faded pink right now, with a multi-colored scarf tied around it. I’m still shocked—absolutely astonished—by all the people who mistook her for *me*.

We act *nothing* alike.

“Probably Tinder,” I reply flatly, absorbed in the script I’m still trying to memorize.

“You don’t *play* Tinder.”

“You do if you’re Vance Reigns.” I highlight a line. “And why are you so interested? He burned you at ExcelsiCon pretty badly. He’s a jerk. Ignore him.”

“Yeah but . . .” She scrunches her nose. “I dunno. I got this feeling.” She chances another look across the warehouse to Vance, who is dressed in one of Sond’s more revealing costumes: a low-cut V-neck and torn sleeves and mussed hair. He’s slouched in his chair, playing a game on his phone, looking as bored and tragic as usual. “I think there’s more than meets the eye. Like a Decepticon.”

“A what? Never mind. Suit yourself. Don’t say I didn’t warn you.” I turn to the last page of the day’s script, but I still can’t seem to concentrate. My foot is bobbing with my nerves.

Imogen eyes my wiggling foot. “Something wrong?”

“What?”

She motions to my foot, and I still it instantly. “*That.*”

“No . . .”

But of course she sees right through me. I’m *not* fine. I haven’t heard from Harper in an hour and a half and it can’t take *that* long to get from the airport to the studio lot unless something went desperately wrong. Or maybe she came to her senses. Maybe she’s on a plane back to Chicago as we speak—

Calm down, Jess. She’s not running away. She won’t leave you, I tell myself, even though a small voice in the back of my head whispers that maybe she should. Because I’m a lot to handle. I make people sigh a lot, in a way that makes me feel tired, too, and I don’t want Harper to ever get tired of me. I can act better long distance. I can play the part she wants.

I can—

“Of course she’s nervous. Her girlfriend’s coming to visit today,” says a voice behind me, and Darien comes up, adjusting the stunt harness beneath his Carmindor-blue coat. “When’s she going to be here?”

I give him a pointed look. “She’s *not* my girlfriend.”

Not yet, anyway.

Imogen gasps. “Harper’s coming to the set? Why didn’t anyone *tell* me?”

“I just—I just didn’t think about it,” I reply flippantly, and Darien gives me one of those single-arched-eyebrow looks that I *absolutely* hate. I glare at him. “Don’t you have a stunt shoot to get to?”

He opens his mouth to respond when the stunt coordinator, Jeff, shouts over to him. He mutters under his breath and sulks toward the set. “*Fine.*”

Imogen gives me a pointed look once he's gone. "Why didn't you tell me she was coming?"

"I just forgot, okay?" I reply, closing my script. I'm clearly not going to be memorizing any lines today. "I had a lot on my mind and—" She gives me a look, not unlike the look Darien gave me, and I sigh. "I'm sorry, I should've. It really just slipped my mind. I knew, so I thought everyone else did. She's kind of my entire world." The moment I say it, a blush crawls up my cheeks. I stare down at my script, mentally kicking myself in the shins. Because while we've never actually claimed the word *girlfriend*, we've kind of already been there for months. And inviting her out here is partly because that's something I want to talk about.

About the word *girlfriend* and . . . moving in together.

Just thinking about the possibility—about her being real, with me, and not six-hundred miles away—makes my heart flutter in a way I can't describe.

I check my phone again, but Harper still hasn't texted. Darien's wrong—I'm not just thinking of myself. I'm thinking about her. About us. About all the things that would change if she says *yes*.

"You look like you're thinking about something tragic," Natalia says as she sits down in the chair that says DARIEN FREEMAN. On the set, Darien is hoisted up on bungee cords to the ceiling. In this scene, Carmindor free-falls four stories through the Intergalactic Federation's space station, chased by a horde of angry fist-sized robots controlled by Sond.

I remember Darien's stunts quite fondly from the first movie, and how he absolutely *hates* heights.

"A little higher, if you can," she shouts.

“This is plenty high,” Darien calls back, his voice an octave higher than usual.

“I can go a little higher,” Jeff says.

Natalia waves her hand. “Hoist ’em up!” She seems to be enjoying the scene a little too much. She shouts at the stunt coordinator to prep the shot. Everyone settles down into their job, and the set goes quiet. “And . . . action!”

Suddenly, the taut ropes go slack on Darien as he plummets toward the ground in a free-fall that I would have, one hundred percent, let my stunt double do if I was in his shoes. But he’s stubborn. He wants to try everything himself first, and I like watching the struggle. The bungee grows taut again and bounces him back up in the air. Natalia reviews the footage. “Look a little more like you’re purposefully jumping out of a window,” she calls to him, and then settles back in the chair as the stunt director hoists him into position.

“Is he... *crying*?” I mutter.

“He’ll be fine,” Natalia waves off, and turns to me. “Now, we need to discuss the elephant in the room.”

I nod, tapping my highlighter on the script. “Yeah, I’ve been meaning to tell you, I don’t think Amara would say, ‘I shall yeet you into the abyss,’ but I like the sentiment.”

“We do need to discuss that, too, but what I’m currently wondering is—”

“READY!” Jeff calls from the edge of the set. Poor Darien hangs like a ragdoll from the top of the warehouse. He looks dead—or at least like he fainted.

Natalia finishes her thought, “—why you have been so distracted recently.”

I tense. “Distracted?”

She takes the script from me and flips to page four, reading one of Darien's lines. "You are not you. You are an imposter, some daughter from a distant universe," and waits for my line.

Shit.

I open my mouth. Close it. Open it again. My mind is blank. Natalia's made her case.

"Now," the director says, closing the script again and handing it back to me. "What's wrong?"

I take a deep breath. "I'm going to ask Harper to move in with me, and that means taking our relationship public, and that means . . ." I hesitate.

"Everyone will know you two are together. It means gossip mags tearing you apart, dissecting every little fight you have, spreading rumors when either of you are caught out with someone else—putting worms in your head about the other being unfaithful. I get it. It's hard," she finishes for me. "It's not easy, fitting into Amara's shoes. But for what it's worth, I don't think she'd give a rat's ass what anyone thought of her. And I don't think you should, either. Embrace the Disney Princess you probably are and follow your heart—or some other nonsense. You'll figure it out. You're strong enough." Then she turns back to the set and shouts, "Ready on set! In three, two, one . . ."

Follow your heart, she said, and I know she's right. I mutter that I need to use the bathroom, pushing myself out of my chair, but the truth is I just need a few minutes alone to get myself together. I set my script down on my chair and step over the wires to the cameras and lights. Behind me, I hear the snap of the bungee cord as Darien freefalls again through the air.

"Somehow that one was *worse*," Natalia barks at him. "I need you to look like you're—Darien, are you listening? Darien."

“I think he’s disassociating, ma’am,” Jeff replies.

Poor Darien.

At least this scene will keep the set occupied for a while. I won’t be needed right away. I grab my robe and pull it on before I step outside into the sunshine outside.

I STARE DOWN AT MY PHONE, at the text that I’ve composed but not sent, my thumb hovering over the SEND button. *Hey babe, where are you? Didn’t get cold feet, did you? Ha.* Does the “ha” makes it sounds more or less desperate? I don’t know.

I don’t know anything.

“Oh, hey—what are you doing out here?” Ethan asks, startling me from my phone. He went on a coffee run and takes my soy macchiato out of the holster and hands it to me. “Is everything okay?”

“Yeah.”

“Have you heard from Harp—”

“Oh *no*.” I glance down at my phone, and I kick myself for sending that message. When Ethan startled me, I must’ve hit send. “Argh!” I cry, aggravated. “Look what you made me do.”

“I didn’t make you do anything,” he replies, baffled. “What did you sen—oh,” he adds as I show him the text. “Well. The ‘ha’ makes it sound very desperate. I would’ve gone with a crazy face or LOL or something else.”

I groan.

Ethan gives me a long-suffering look. “If I haven’t left you yet—me, your platonic best friend and partner in crime—then

there's zero chance the girl who is actively in love with you in a romantic way will head for the hills because of *a text*."

Somehow, I don't feel any better.

"You know," he adds, "maybe you should just go back to your trailer for a bit. Get some rest. Watch an episode of *The Bachelor* or something. I'll call you when your scene's up?"

"Yeah, that sounds like a good idea."

"Good!" He beams. "Lemme know how it goes!"

"Watching *The Bachelor*?"

"Uh, yeah!"

I roll my eyes as Imogen calls from the warehouse door. He quickly excuses himself and strides toward the door with the rest of the coffees in hand.

I pull my hood up higher and make my way back to my trailer. Because of the secrecy around the film, we have to wear these cultish robes whenever we go out, in case fans or paparazzi accidentally catch a glimpse of our costumes. "Any hint is a bad hint," Natalia told us on the first day of shooting. "After that fiasco at ExcelsiCon, we want them guessing the rest."

Enter the cult robes.

At the edge of the lot, a few of the fans shout at me—"Jess! Jess!"—wanting me to come over and talk to them. I wave, but I don't go over because it's against protocol, and there isn't much security around to protect me. And besides, even if I wanted to, I'm wearing one of the final-scene costumes underneath my robe, so I *really* can't.

Tomorrow's the last day of filming, and then I'm done.

Perhaps for good.

It wasn't that bad, really, being Amara. The wig is hot, but I can't take it off unless I want more work for Sharon, so I just pull

the hair to one side and try to will myself not to sweat too much. The costumes were pretty, even if I had to run in heels and wear layers upon layers of spandex. And, really, Darien was the perfect co-pilot for this ride.

I don't think I will ever meet a better one in this career.

With those thoughts, heavy and bittersweet in my mind, I return to my trailer. It's dark and quiet. Sharon's packed up most of her makeup. She's somewhere else on set, probably, doing touch-ups to other actors and stunt doubles. I breathe deeply in the quiet. The trailer door swings closed behind me, blocking out all of the sounds of fans just outside the lot. I can still hear them, but they're muted.

And that's when I see her, sitting there on the sofa in my trailer. Her black hair is pulled back into a tight bun at the top of her head, accented with a ribbon that matches her fuchsia jacket, a black shirt and black jeans underneath. Her flats are kicked off on the floor beside the sofa.

I stare at her like she's a ghost. She's here—in my trailer. Sitting on my sofa. Looking so at home, I *ache*.

"You're here," I whisper.

"Hi, Sunshine," she replies with a smile. "You really think I'd get cold feet?"

My cheeks warm with embarrassment. "I thought—that maybe you—that I had—"

"Scared me away? Sunshine," she laughs and shows me the text—the mortifying text, "this won't scare me away." Then she pats the space on the sofa next to her, and I hesitantly sink down onto the cushions beside her.

Sunshine. Her nickname for me. She takes my chin with her fingers and turns my face toward her, and then she kisses me. She

tastes like soda and cherry Chapstick, and it's so freaking cliché I almost giggle. It feels so good to have her here—in person. All of my sharp edges feel softer against her. She goes on, kissing the edge of my mouth, “I've missed you.”

“I've missed you, too,” I reply, relieved that she said it first.

“And . . . and I love you, Jessica.”

My entire body stiffens at the words. *I love you*. I pull away from her kisses and stare at her, trying to decode if she really means it or if it's just one of those phrases that slipped out, like saying *I love you* to the mailman when he brings you a package you were waiting for.

She chews on her bottom lip, rubbing away a little bit of the bright purple lipstick. “I mean it. I do. I love you—but if you don't feel the same . . . you know . . . that's fine. I mean. Really, it's cool.”

I gobble for words like a fish out of water. And that makes her pull back a little, nervously looking away.

“You know, forget I said anything. It just kind of slipped out, you know? Like saying *I love you* to the grocer—”

“Are you sure?” I finally find my words.

“Yeah, we don't have to say it or anything. I didn't—”

“No, that you love me. Do you mean it?”

She doesn't say anything for a moment. “Yeah,” she finally says, nodding. “I think I really do.”

My mind is spinning. “But—but I'm moody and irrational and I'm such a bitch sometimes and—”

She takes me by my face and smushes my cheeks together. “And that's what I love about you, Jessica Marie Stone.”

“I love you, too.” The words are smushed because my cheeks are smushed and I'm talking between puckered lips. She laughs and lets go of my face.

“Say it again.”

“I love you.”

“I don’t think I heard you—”

I take her by her chin and kiss her on the mouth. “I love you,” I say fervently against her lips. “And I don’t want to be long distance anymore. I want you—I want us—what I mean is—”

“Will you be my girlfriend?” Harper asks. “Officially?”

I find myself smiling. Of course, she already knows what I’m about to ask. Well, half of it. “Yes. Will you move in with me?”

She gives a start. “To L.A.?”

“Yeah, L.A.”

“Are you sure?”

I nod. “More sure than I’ve ever been. I love you. So much. I love how you are artistic and patient and no-nonsense. I love how you see the world, and I love how you make me better for it. I love—”

She kisses me to shut me up. “I get it. Jessica Stone loves *me*. God, it feels like a romcom.”

I lean against her and close my eyes. “What would it be called?”

She thinks for a moment. “The Princess and the Fan-Artist.”

I chuckle. “That sounds like a fairytale.”

“Maybe it is.”

Maybe it is.

My trailer door opens, and Ethan pokes his head in. “Hey, Jess—oh, Harper! You made it! Glad to see the flight was on time,” he adds, and I get the inkling that he knew Harper was in my trailer when he bumped into me earlier. But you know, I’m not all that mad about it. “Natalia gave everyone the go-ahead to leave for the day. Last day of shooting’s tomorrow. Wanna go get

some dinner with me and Mo? I think Elle and Darien and—get this, *Vance*—are coming, too.”

“Isn’t he the asshole?” Harper asks.

“Imogen’s trying to be his friend,” I sigh.

“The poor bastard,” Ethan says.

I laugh. “Okay. Send us the address and we’ll meet you there.” He agrees and closes the trailer door again. Harper begins to dig through my duffle bag for a hoodie I can wear to leave the set, but I think it’s time to stop hiding. I curl my fingers through hers and step out of the trailer with Harper, and we turn toward the fans waiting at the edge of the lot. Darien is there signing a few portraits and taking selfies. He notices us coming over, and he smiles wide.

“Who’s that?” one of the fans, a younger girl, asks as she points at Harper.

“Another actor, probably,” someone else replies.

Harper squeezes my hand, and I squeeze back. “Actually,” I tell them as I smile at her, and she smiles back, “she’s my girlfriend.”



ONCE
AN
EVER
AFTER

Once Upon a Con 3.5

by Ashley Poston



QUIRK BOOKS
PHILADELPHIA

“I THINK WE SHOULD BREAK UP.”

Darien blinks and sits down on the back of the ambulance with me. He laces his fingers together. “Are you sure?”

“I think so.” I pull the emergency tarp around me tightly. My damp hair hangs around my face in clumps, and my body is beginning to ache from the accident.

I’m fine. Vance is fine.

His Tesla, however, is not okay.

It’s still nose down in the pond. There are ducks trying to climb their way onto the back fender. And the paparazzo who accidentally ran us off the road is nowhere to be found. I can’t even remember their license plate number or what the SUV looked like—one of those large black Ford disasters with the tinted windows? Probably—it was all a blur, I admitted to the police officers who responded to the scene. Vance has a bloody nose that he holds as he chats with an officer now, making motions with his hand. At one point the police officer asks him to sign a notepad for his daughter.

Darien looks over to the small gathering of paparazzi who have already begun to gather on the other side of the cop car. Their camera flashes light up the midnight sky. “You could have asked me to take you home instead of Vance.”

“You were having fun, and I had a headache,” I mutter in

reply. I don't tell him the real reason. That the more I stayed in his world, the less I felt like I fit. He's stepping into his career, and all he wants is lights and camera and action, and everyone he touches, everyone he smiles at and high-fives and chats with, basks in the stage lights with him. And I don't belong here. I massage the bridge of my nose. "And Vance was leaving too, so . . ."

"I would've still left to take you home. You mean more to me than some wrap party—"

"I know," I interrupt softly.

He sighs, unwinding his anxiety, and rubs the back of his neck. The paparazzi are beginning to shout questions at us, but luckily, we're far enough away that we can't make them out. "Okay," he says at last, because he isn't a dunce, he knows how I've been feeling for a while, how I don't quite fit in, and he knows that it hurts me. "I'll take the brunt of it."

I give a start. "No way! I suggested it. I don't want you to be the bad guy. Especially leading up to the second movie."

"But I don't want you to, either," he replies softly, and rubs his face with his hands. "I'm just glad you're okay, *ah'blena*."

My heart stutters, still, when he calls me that. Even though we've been dating for two years and some months, even though we've fallen in love with other things together, even though *Starfield* is no longer our secret, but one the entire world is in on. I still love the way he says it, like he treasures it. I do, too.

But . . .

"I'm sorry," I whisper, and purse my mouth so my bottom lip doesn't wobble. "I'm so, so sorry. I love you, but I . . . I can't do this. Being watched all the time, being photographed, being gossiped about. I don't understand how you can exist in this. I don't understand how it doesn't pry you apart."

"I've just learned to live with it, but it doesn't mean you have

to,” he says, and reaches out to fold his fingers into mine. A lump forms in my throat. “I just want you to be happy.”

Me too, because everything that makes me happy has to do with Darien. I don’t know who I am anymore without him, not really. Everyone refers to me as Darien’s girlfriend, or Geekerella. And I am, but I need to know what makes me happy besides him. Who I am when he isn’t here.

I need to find Elle, wherever she went.

Silently, I squeeze his hand tightly. “Can we stay friends?”

“Forever,” he agrees.

“I’ll hold you to that, *ah’blen*,” I reply, and it’s the last time I’ll call him that, and the word feels bitter and sweet on my tongue at the same time. The paparazzi flash their cameras, and rumors start to spread about why Darien’s *girlfriend* would be in a car with bad-boy Vance Reigns, and we hold hands for a while longer.

Just a little while.

Until we feel safe enough to unwind our fingers and become ourselves again.



A FEW WEEKS AFTER Vance’s car is lugged from the pond, the gossip magazines finally get word about our breakup. hollywood’s favorite couple on the rocks?! one terrible entertainment magazine reads. I don’t know who leaked it, but it isn’t the kind of rumor we can just ignore and hope it goes away.

So we don’t.

On *The Today Show* with Jess, Darien addresses the rumors in a video call. “Oh, we’ve taken a bit of a break,” he says. “Elle’s in college and I’m figuring out . . . *this*.”

“That’s so sad!” one of the hosts exclaims. “Was it a bad breakup?”

Darien laughs, and I still love his laugh, and it makes my chest feel tight. “Absolutely not. She’s still my best friend.”

I hug my pillow to my chest. I’m sitting in my apartment with my roommate, Fiona, and she puts a hand on my shoulder and squeezes it tightly. “Are you okay?” she asks.

“Yeah,” I reply because I think I am. I mean, I’m not demolished like I was at the end of episode 54 of *Starfield*. I’m not sobbing on the floor in a complete mess because Amara is dead and Carmindor is all alone in the universe.

Because I’m not alone, and neither is Darien.

We’re still friends, we still text, we’re still going to be in each other’s lives, and I tell myself everything is going to be okay. I made the right decision. I know I did.

My chest still hurts, though, in the way things always hurt when you do the hard thing.

“Okay, good—then I want to go to Disneyland today,” Fiona declares. “My friend gave me free passes and we *have* to go.”

“*Today?*”

“Unless you don’t wanna play hooky from Professor Brant’s boring film theory class.”

I make a face. If I have to sit through one more showing of *Starship Troopers* then I’m going to vomit, and Professor Brant loves *Starship Troopers*. He thinks it’s the best sci-fi film in the history of cinema. He also thinks that *Starfield* is—and I quote—“plebian trash,” so he lost my respect the second *plebian* came out of his mouth. Fiona feels the same, but she’s definitely a Trekkie. We were assigned to the same dorm room our freshman year at the University of Southern California, and we got along so well that we decided to room with each other again sophomore year.

She knew about Darien, and who I was—the entire internet did, thanks to Chloe’s friends uploading Darien’s love confession on the golf course. But unlike most of the internet, Fiona didn’t keep up with the gossip columns or Twitter hashtags.

No, it was Sage who texted me about #Cheaterella the morning after Darien officially broke the news, and like I knew the internet would, everyone translated “Elle and I decided to take a break” into “Elle cheated.”

Then people start to connect Vance’s accident with the breakup, and *gross*. Never mind that Vance is the last person I would ever hook up with and he’s head over heels for a cute bookworm from the small town his parents banished him to, never mind that I haven’t expressed interest in *anyone* before, during, or after Darien, and that I have so much schoolwork just the thought of dating gives me hives. It doesn’t matter.

People have already made their decision.

I dye my hair purple and, for the rest of the semester until Christmas break, shove it into a USC cap when the paparazzi catch on. A few catch me coming out of a Starbucks where I’m finishing up a script, and when I’m hurrying to my car from the gym, but slowly the press around me fades.

The hashtag sinks into obscurity.

And when everything is quiet and the paparazzi are chasing after someone else, Darien slinks into my apartment, and we sit on the floor sharing a bowl of popcorn and M&Ms and watch old reruns of *Starfield* and new adaptations of YA fantasy novels and nature documentaries about plankton and vent about movies and college and the lack of diversity in media *still*.

And it’s like that way for a while.

We don’t cuddle, we only touch each other by accident—our hands meeting in the popcorn bowl or reaching for the remote

or accidentally knocking knees on the couch. And my heart races still.

It's the contact. I don't have much of that these days. I'm happy the way we are. If we never change, it'll be okay.

But things never stay the same. I should know that by now.

One evening in September of my junior year, we're sitting on the ground trying to fit together a bookcase that is *way* too complicated for something from IKEA, and Darien is frustratedly unscrewing a shelf we both put in backward when he asks, "Would it be okay if I dated someone?"

Surprised, I look up from the directions. "Kate?"

Kate was his costar in an indie film about skateboarding over the summer. He learned how to do a sick kickflip, and the immediately sprained his ankle. For the rest of the movie, they had to find a stunt double, and Kate apparently never let him live it down.

The tips of his ears turn red. "Is it *that* obvious?"

"Absolutely! I mean, no—not to anyone who doesn't know you," I add, and I know him best. I know he mixes barbecue sauce into his mac and cheese, and that he brushes his teeth after every meal, and that the things he enjoys the most he complains about. Like acting. And doing his own stunts. And exercising.

And Kate.

"It won't be awkward?" he asks. "If I . . ."

"Not unless you make it awkward," I reply wryly.

"I'll try not to."

"And don't do that thing where you feel guilty about doing something that makes you happy when I'm not a part of it."

He gives me a stricken look. "I do *not*."

"You absolutely do." I fold up the directions, being careful with the emotions on my face, and I punch his shoulder tenderly.

“I want you happy, Darien, however that is.”

He grins and rubs his shoulder. “I can’t wait for you to meet her.”

When we finally get the bookshelf together, he leaves for her place—they’re going to order in nachos and watch a rom-com—and I close the door behind him and press my back against it.

It’s okay, I tell myself, rubbing my tight chest.

I want him to be happy, and if this makes him happy—then I’m happy, too.

And to be fair, Kate is a genuinely nice person, even though we have absolutely nothing in common. She likes yoga and the art of ikebana, and like her flower arrangements, everything in her life has its place. She has calendars for everything, and she’s never late to anything, and she’s always good at what she does.

The first time I see Darien and Kate together, I know he’s smitten.

Sage asks on one of our weekly FaceTimes how I feel, and I tell her the truth. “I’m happy he’s happy.”

“Yeah, no, that’s a bullshit answer.”

I give a one-shouldered shrug. “I’m still trying to find what makes me happy. I can’t ask him to put his life on hold for me, Sage.”

“No, but it doesn’t mean it doesn’t suck.”

She’s right.

Months turn into a year, and I throw big watch parties for the Oscars and the Emmys, and I watch Darien as he roams the red carpet with Kate and smiles at his fans. Jessica Stone wins two more Oscars for a supporting role in a gay *Emma* retelling, and Darien is always seen in the crowd being her biggest fan. Darien himself is nominated once, but he doesn’t win. He and Kate get invested in charity organizations—I think Kate’s big one

is something to do with children with a certain kind of cancer—and he cuts his hair short and grows a trimmed beard.

They go vegan, supposedly, even though whenever Darien comes over to my apartment he takes the bacon out of the fridge and fries him up the entire pack.

But as the year passes, he stops by less and less.

A month and a half after I graduate from undergrad, my first script gets bought by a big studio for not a lot of money, and Darien shows up on my doorstep for the first time in months with a bottle of champagne he stole from one of his charity drives.

“We gotta celebrate!” he cries when I answer the door.

Baffled, I let him into my messy, itty-bitty L.A. apartment. Fiona’s in South Korea now, teaching English to kindergarteners and going to talent rehearsals on the weekends, hoping to break into the music industry. So I live by myself with two dumpster cats named Pot Roast and Chutney. They refuse to even look at me, but they rub around Darien’s legs and burrow into his lap like they’re not feral demons.

“What—what are you doing here?” I ask, befuddled. “Aren’t you supposed to be at a silent auction or something for your charity?”

“It was boring,” he dismisses, and rummages in my kitchen drawers for a corkscrew. Then he pauses and adds, “Not that kids with colorectal cancer are boring or aren’t in need of help.”

He’s been explicitly clear about everything since the whole #Cheaterella scandal years ago, when the internet at large twisted his words. He tried to rectify it, but sometimes rumors become larger than the story itself.

It never happened again, though.

“And Kate?” I venture.

“She gave me her blessing, don’t worry.” He can’t find the

corkscrew, so I help him out and take the bottle from him, grab a butcher knife, and slice the top open. The foam pours out into the sink.

He stares in wonder. “Where did you learn *that*?”

“Cal, when I went to visit her and Sage over spring break in New York. She bartended for a bit somewhere in SoHo. They did it for show or something, but with a sword instead.”

“Can you do it with a sword?”

I think for a moment. “Probably.”

“Sexy. And you’re still single why?”

I laugh and put the butcher knife away. “I just sold a script, I don’t have time for *romance*.”

And it’s true for the most part. I’ve worked for so long to get to where I am now, I can’t imagine what it’ll take to sell another script, to climb a little higher on the ladder. Sometimes, to chase after the things you love, you abandon other things, and that’s okay for a while.

It won’t be forever.

Besides, I’m perfectly happy. Like Darien. Only—different.

He takes two champagne glasses out of the cabinet—the only two I have—and I fill them to the top. He hands me one, and we clink glasses.

“Then to your success,” he cheers. “Let’s hope the world never gets tired of your weird, brilliant imagination.”

“Oh stop, you’ll ruin the moment.” I shush him, and we clink glasses and shotgun the entire thing together.

Then I fill our glasses again, and we sit on my antique floral couch with Pot Roast and Chutney, and I tell him about my script and how it got bought, and he tells me about tonight’s silent auction and how Kate loves being in control of it and he just lets her. He talks about Kate like I’m sure he once spoke

about me, and it makes me feel a bit nostalgic about the years we spent calling each other secret names and watching the stars and quoting reruns of *Starfield* so often we absolutely annoyed all of our friends.

But the more I think back on those years, the more I wonder what else we had in common. What stuck us together, what brought us into orbit? Things seemed so simple when we were kids. When I was just running a fan blog, and he was a fanboy with the world's coolest job. I'm not sure what else we had, or what we'd have now.

I'm happy for Darien and Kate. Genuinely.

Even though there's still a bit of bitterness underneath.

"I think I'm going to ask her to move in with me," he says, and I almost choke on my champagne.

"Move *in*?" I cough.

"I mean—should I ask to move to her place instead? Or do you think it's a bad idea?"

"No! No, of course not," I quickly reply, regaining my composure, shoving my bitterness into a small box. "Though, I think that you should let her decide? About who moves where? But I do love your apartment," I add, a bit mournfully. "It has a great view of the Hollywood sign."

"You can live there if you want," he offers.

I snort a laugh. "And what'll the paparazzi think about that one? Darien's childhood sweetheart moving into his apartment?"

"Oh." He frowns. "Right. Well then, I can sell it to you for—"

"Rosie's father and Vance's guardian got married last week," I interrupt, hoping to change the subject. It's not that I'm not grateful that he'd think about selling it to me for cheap but . . . I couldn't live there. Memories of him would be everywhere, like a ghost of *what ifs*.

No one tells you that after all the fireworks and romantic gestures, the loves that don't work out become these pockets of sorrow. Land mines you don't want to step on. Memories you want to keep tightly in a box, locked away for your own sanity.

Darien's eyes jerk up. "Roman and Eli?"

"Yeah. Vance said it was a small wedding at the castle-house he went to the fall he was banished from Hollywood—remember that?"

"Right after a paparazzo ran you two into the pond. I remember," he replies a little wryly.

When we broke up is what he doesn't say, and I kick myself for leading the conversation in the wrong direction. That night feels like a lifetime ago, different people ago. He counts it in movies and productions and red carpets, and I count it in words in a script and nights I spent wondering if I did the right thing.

I always convince myself that I did.

Pot Roast slinks up to Darien and headbutts him in the arm until he starts to pet her. "How about you?" he asks finally. "You've been single for a long time."

"Not true, I had a fling with that comedian."

"Oh yeah, what happened to him?"

I scrub Chutney behind the ears, and he purrs like a motorboat. "He made a joke one night about dating Geekerella."

He winces. "Oof . . ."

"It's fine."

We sit and sip on the rest of the champagne for a while, before he says, "You know, my costar from *Starfield* is still single. Calvin?"

"Are you throwing me a *pity date*, Darien Freeman?"

He winces. "Now that I think about it . . ."

"I don't need any pity dates," I say. "I'm perfectly happy."

And—thank god—he believes me as we sit on opposite ends of the floral couch, drinking the rest of the champagne, miles from where we started, and everything is fine.

But things aren't fine forever.

SAGE CALLS ME ONE AFTERNOON in June, sobbing. Sage never sobs, not even when her hairstylist fried her hair and she had to buzz her head. She never cries about anything. So I know it's bad the moment I pick up the phone.

It's about Frank.

"He's gone," she sobs. "H-He's gone. He had trouble breathing l-last night and we took him to the e-emergency vet and—and—"

And suddenly, the world has changed again.

I'm used to sad things. I've experienced sadder—my parents—but it doesn't soften the blow. Things are sad in different ways. My breakup with Darien was sad in the soft and quiet way, and Darien kissing Kate on the front page of *People* was sad in a bitter, twisting way. Frank's death is like a window cracking. It's sharp and sudden and terrible.

I don't remember hanging up the phone. I don't remember sliding down to the kitchen floor, my hands stuffed into my mouth so my heartache doesn't alert the neighbors.

I don't remember how long I sit there before Darien is opening my apartment door with his spare key. He finds me on the floor in the kitchen. I haven't moved. Sage probably texted him. Told him what happened. But I'm still confused that he's here.

"A-Aren't you supposed to be having dinner with Kate?" I ask with a snuffle, almost blowing snot bubbles out of my clogged

nose. “For y-your anniversary?”

“We rescheduled,” he replies gently, wiping my eyes.

“B-But . . .”

“I’m here, okay?” And he says it in a way that makes me nervous, but I don’t question it, because I can’t float anymore, and I cling onto his arms and hold on tightly until I can’t cry anymore. It’s selfish, I know, but his arms are warm, and he holds me so tightly I miss every night he used to hold me just like this, when we were young and foolish and whole, and I want just a moment more.

I don’t remember falling asleep in his arms, but I must have because the next thing I know it’s three in the morning and I’m lying above the covers on my bed, and Darien is lying next to me.

For a moment, it feels like we’re together again, on nights when he used to sneak over to my college dorm, and we’d lie together in my cramped single bed and tell each other about our day. My heart twists. I miss that, but I don’t miss the paparazzi always stalking outside where I live, and I don’t miss having to shield my face whenever I go for coffee or run errands. I don’t miss the gossip magazines, I don’t miss worrying about my weight, I don’t miss all the people saying that I’m not worthy of Darien Freeman, that I’m not anywhere near his league.

But I’d be lying if I say I don’t miss him.

Because I do.

I miss him in the same ways that Carmindor misses Amara after the final episode of *Starfield*, in all the books after. I miss him in the quiet of the night, when my brain finally slows down and I can settle into feeling human again, and I miss the way he laces his fingers through mine like we’re a tapestry, and the way he snores in whistles when he’s on his back, and the way when his hair was a tiny bit longer, it’d curl in around his ears. I miss

the way he makes his mom's tikka masala, and I miss how he can shotgun a coke and crush it against his chest. I miss how he laments the rubbery texture of turkey bacon whenever his trainer puts him on another diet, and how salads are unforgiveable without extra-crunchy croutons.

I miss how his text messaging sound had been the beep-beep-boop from the *Starfield* communication device for *years* until he met Kate, and I miss how even now he goes undercover at Excel-siCon every year and surprises fans at the masquerade ball. How he has such a big heart, and he accommodates so many people, and I never wanted him to have to accommodate me. And I miss how whenever I had a hard day, he would invite me over to his place and turn on the stereo and pop in my dad's favorite CD and slow-dance me around his living room.

I miss him.

God, I miss him so much it hurts, and if this was any other world, in any other universe, if *I* was anyone else . . .

I brush a piece of his dark hair away from his face, and he groggily cracks open an eye. "Oh, you're awake."

I quickly pull my hand away. "Sorry, did I wake you?"

"You didn't," he lies, and stretches, the bottom of his shirt sliding up to reveal a bit of his stomach—before he freezes. His eyes widen. "What time is it?"

"Three in the morning?"

He curses and scrambles to sit up in bed, fumbling for his phone in his jacket pocket. He pulls it out and runs his fingers through his hair as he scans through the missed messages and calls.

All from Kate.

"Sorry," he says tightly, scooting off the bed, and closes himself in the bathroom. But my apartment is pretty crappy, and my

bathroom door doesn't close all the way, so it creaks open just enough for me to watch him pace in the bathroom mirror. He talks to Kate in low murmurs, animatedly using his hands. My heart sinks down into my stomach. I should've told him to leave when he got here. Turn around and go back to Kate.

I shouldn't have fallen into his arms. I shouldn't have let my guard down. He's not with me anymore. He shouldn't be the one to comfort me, either.

He should be there to comfort Kate.

Be there for Kate.

Be a best friend to *Kate*.

Not me.

A few minutes later, he apologetically comes back out of the bathroom. "I'm sorry, I have to leave," he says as he hops into his shoes he deposited on the floor. Where he always used to. It's frightening, how easily we can slip back into what was.

"I think . . . I should have the spare key back," I say. I've scooted to the edge of the bed, my arms wrapped tightly over my chest.

He frowns. "The key?"

"You're too nice," I say, and my voice cracks. "And you're too good. And I don't want that to mess up your relationship with Kate."

"Elle, that's absurd—"

"It's not," I snap. "It's not absurd. You left a dinner with Kate that she had been planning for *months*. For your *anniversary*. That's important, and instead you came to comfort *me* about losing an old, geriatric dog."

"Frank was more than that."

"I know but—you need priorities," I say forcefully, and I hold out my hand for the key. "And I can't be it."

His face turns cold. “I think I can judge what my priorities are, Elle.”

“Apparently you can’t! You’re *here*, aren’t you? You’re going to go home and have a fight with Kate and—I was already labeled the cheater. I don’t want to be in tomorrow’s gossip columns for trying to steal you back.”

“Gossip columns!” he cries and throws up his hands. “That’s why?”

“You wouldn’t understand.”

“Not if you don’t communicate—”

That makes me angry. “I’m not your girlfriend, Darien! I’m not your *ah’blena*. Go home.” Tears are beginning to burn in my eyes, and I don’t want him to see me cry. “*Please.*”

Please leave.

Please don’t make this kind of mistake because of me.

Please don’t linger, looking at me the way you do, as if you know I don’t want you to leave. Please, because I gave you up a long time ago, and I was a fool to think that being best friends would ever be good enough.

It never will. It’s all or nothing.

And I choose nothing.

He purses his lips and looks away, fisting and unfisting his hands, until he decides that whatever argument we were bound to get into wasn’t worth the energy, that I wasn’t worth this fight, and he takes my key from his keyring and places it in my hand.

“Lock the door behind me,” he mutters, because even though he’s angry he still wants me safe.

Alone in my apartment, I press my back against the door and slide to the ground and sit there for a long time. I don’t cry, but I don’t feel very much alive, either.

I don’t feel like anything as Pot Roast and Chutney come up

and bump my hands with the backs of their heads, and I pull them into a hug. For the first few seconds, they let me, but then they squirm out and I tilt sideways onto the floor and I lie there. The tile is cool, and the streetlights through my balcony window are a warm orange, and for the first time in my life I wish I were different.

I wish I were someone who fit comfortably into Darien's life, a puzzle piece cut to fit the exact hole he's missing . . . but I'm not.

I never will be.

And that hurts most of all.

DARIEN DOESN'T COMPLETELY LEAVE MY LIFE. He can't. He's too entrenched in our friend groups, in too many text chains, with too many inside jokes. Sage and Cal are the first to figure out something happened. Then Vance and Jess catch on, and through them Rosie and Mo and Ethan and Harper, and then Rosie's friends, and then Mo's friends, and Harper's—and soon everyone's tiptoeing around our text threads as if walking on eggshells.

I draw myself away from the group chats. I laugh at the memes, and answer texts when asked, but otherwise I don't participate. I met almost everyone through Darien anyway, and I'm sure Darien will be the one they'll want to keep if things come to choosing sides.

He hasn't texted me, not once.

I think about shooting him a *Starfield* meme, or a rumor of a third film but . . . then I stop, and I delete the message, and I look at the spare key I put on the edge of my counter. I stay off social media and don't read gossip columns. I burrow myself in a spec

script for a new *Starfield* television show. It's just something to put in my portfolio.

Something to pass the time.

About a prince who will inherit the sun, and a princess who will destroy the stars, searching for somewhere to fit in on a ship named the *Prospero*. In the script, everything can fall apart and be cobbled back together. There's a certainness to stories.

Sage starts plotting my cosplay for this year's ExcelsiCon, and I laugh. "It's two months away!"

"Exactly! Too little time!" she cries. "What do you want to be?"

I roll my eyes. "The courtesan duchess from the Helix Nebula in the dwarf system."

"I can do that!"

"They're a jellyfish with spider legs."

"Hmm, that might be hard."

"I don't know what I want to be this year. I was just thinking about going as myself," I say with a shrug, feeding Pot Roast and Chutney their breakfast. They shove their heads into their dishes and snarf the food down like they're starving. (They aren't.) "Roam the con in comfortable clothes for once."

Sage gasps. "Are you sick? Were you kidnapped? Elle! If you hear me! Scream!"

"I'm fine!" I laugh. "I just have a lot on my mind right now. Rain check?"

My best friend doesn't believe me, but she sighs and says, "Fine. Rain check." Which just means I must come up with a cosplay idea by the next time she calls. I truly haven't even thought about this year's ExcelsiCon, though not because I'm not *excited* about it. It'll be the five-year anniversary of the reboot!

Five years.

It feels like eons longer, and no time at all.

The wall unit goes out in my apartment in mid-June, so I start writing in coffee shops in the neighborhood, but that turns out to be a *terrible* idea. I'm outside at one of the Starbucks tables with an umbrella, readjusting my laptop so I can see the screen, when a woman comes up to me. I don't recognize her at first because she's right in the sunlight, but I squint and shield my eyes, asking if she needs anything. Then I freeze.

It's Kate.

Brown hair, a heart-shaped face, perpetually tanned skin and perfectly trim. It's hot as hell out in L.A. today and she somehow looks so artfully put together I feel like a slime melting in the sun. She pushes up her sunglasses. "Hi, Elle."

"Um—Kate." I sit up straight in my chair. "It's nice to see you—"

"You're lucky," she interrupts. "I don't think anyone will complete Darien quite like you did."

I don't understand but she turns to leave before I can say anything. Across the street, two paparazzi snap photos of her clipping away on her vegan sandals, and I'm left confused.

I don't understand.

Until Jess calls me that night while I'm eating raw snap-off cookie dough and watching *The Great British Bake-Off* and tells me, "Darien and Kate broke up."

I don't think I hear her at first. "They what?"

"Darien ended things. It's going to be all over social tomorrow. I—I think you should be prepared, that's all," she adds, because we all remembered what happened last time.

For the next thirty minutes, I delete my social media accounts, I set the ones I can't delete to private, and I make sure that my address hasn't been leaked anywhere online.

Then I sit and wait.

And mercifully, my name is barely mentioned. It's there—coming from journalists and paparazzi who shout at him as he's walking out of the gym—but no one runs with it. No one says I made him end things.

It's like I'm finally no one again. Faded into obscurity.

But then why don't I feel happy about it?

SAGE MEETS ME AT THE BAGGAGE CLAIM in Atlanta. After a cancelled flight yesterday due to bad weather—in L.A.!—I finally caught one today, and with the time change, it's almost five o'clock when I arrive. I'll barely have a day at ExcelsiCon before I have to fly right back. I debated whether to come at all—a canceled flight isn't my fault, after all—and I know I'll see Darien here, and we'll have to smile and pretend everything is all right.

I've never been particularly good at that.

But I'm here, despite my best judgment. At least I'm not the only one arriving late. Sage tells me that Cal is coming in later tonight, because she wanted to stop by Charleston and visit her sister and mother on the way down. I haven't asked how my stepmother's been in a few years, other than quick Christmas FaceTimes and presents exchanged via mail, and I can't say I regret it.

She was a monster to me when I lived with her in high school. I can forgive that sort of thing, but I'll never forget.

Cal doesn't blame me.

"Oh, it's so good to *see* you!" Sage wraps her arms around me in a tight hug. She's let her hair grow out a bit, and it's this really pretty mermaid blue-green that almost perfectly matches

her eyes. “How was the flight?”

“Hurling through space and time in a tin can is always fun,” I reply.

“Yeah, I sat beside a toddler who kept sharing his Legos with me. Want Carmindor?” she asks, holding up the Lego. “The little turd also gave me a Darth Vader and a Sond.”

I take the Carmindor Lego figure. It doesn’t look much like Darien. We stand there a moment in silence and then I say, quietly, “It’s weird without Frank here.”

“It is. Cal wants to get another dog but I’m just not ready yet, you know? I loved that little monster, even when he chewed holes through my underwear.”

We laugh a little because Frank always did love chewing on expensive underwear (and *only* expensive underwear), and Sage leads me to her rented car in the parking garage. I load my hot-pink suitcase into the trunk and climb into the passenger seat. The old food truck finally gasped its last breath a few years ago, and Sage’s mother opened a brick-and-mortar restaurant up in North Charleston. It was featured on some food show, and ever since then business has been great.

“Are you *sure* you don’t want to cosplay this year?” she asks as we pull out of the parking lot. “It’s just so weird not seeing you in cosplay at ExcelsiCon.”

I shrug. “I just didn’t feel it this year.”

“At all? What’re you going to do for the masquerade?”

“I think there’s a *Starfield* marathon happening in one of the rooms where they play all of the episodes at 2x and you get to boo at the screen every time Euci makes a bad joke.”

Sage frowns. “If you’re sure . . .”

“Absolutely.”

And if my plan works, I won’t have to see Darien at all, or

smile awkwardly at him, or pretend to be okay.

I scroll through the ExcelsiCon app, picking out what to do instead of the masquerade, until the taxi pulls up to the Marriot Peachtree Hotel. Then I take out my badge from my carry-on satchel and slip it over my head, and suddenly I feel a little better. Sage offers me her arm, and I lace mine through it, and we walk through the automatic doors into the hotel.

And suddenly, I'm home.

ExcelsiCon.

Sage takes my hand and squeezes it tightly, and we ride the escalators up to the main floor together. The lobby floor is packed with all kinds of people dressed in all different fandoms, some in graphic tees, others in cosplay, others in designer TARDIS dresses and Starfleet skirts and *Starfield* rompers. No matter how many years I come to ExcelsiCon, my Dad's comic-con, the awe never goes away. If I imagine hard enough, I can see my parents pulling each other through where the crowd is the thickest, a flash of Carmindor blue and Amara purple, there for a flash and then gone.

They had a love story here. I'm sure a lot of people do. All different kinds of love stories. Best friend love stories, the romantic and soul-searching kind, the love stories where you fall into a fandom, find yourself in a character, and feel happy and whole and seen.

I guess I kind of had a love story, too, but sometimes stories don't go the way you think they will.

"Elle!" Jess cries, throwing her arms up. She's wearing a blonde wig and pink dress, and I think she's cosplaying as Princess Peach. Harper is probably in Artist Alley—though her booth should be closing soon for the evening. "We've been waiting *ages!*"

I give her a peculiar look. "Waiting for what?"

She grabs me by the hand and squeezes it tightly. “You’ll see.”
“Sage . . .” I warn.

Sage holds up her hands. “Honest to god, I only had a *little* to do with it.”

Alarms go off in my head. No, absolutely not. No no no—“A little to do with wha—”

Suddenly, Jess plunges me into the crowd. She pulls me through smashed bodies, between Star Wars fan meets and an impromptu Dr. Horrible’s Sing-Along, until I’m dizzy from all the colors and props and people. She shoves her shoulder against a stairwell door, and we climb the flight to the second floor where only con guests and volunteers are allowed, to the pristine second-floor bathroom—the only *good* bathroom—and she whisks me inside.

And to my utter horror, Harper’s waiting, as are Imogen and Rosie and a few of Rosie’s friends from home. They smile at me in a way that I do *not* like in the least, not at all, not one bit, as they step aside and reveal a dress.

But not just any dress.

“It’s been five years,” Sage says, coming into the bathroom after us, and putting her chin on my shoulder, “I think it’s time. I, of course, made some alterations.”

“I said I didn’t want—”

“Wait for it!” one of Rosie’s friends—Quinn, I think?—cries and turns something on in the bustle of the dress. Lights flare to life beneath the waterfall of blue and purple and green organza.

“It’s glowing,” I squeak.

“Ion batteries!” Annie, Rosie’s other friend, explains. “Should last you until midnight at *least*.”

Midnight.

Oh no—I know what they’re doing. I shake my head. “No, absolutely not. I—I don’t think I’m going to the masquerade this

year—”

Jess puts a finger to my mouth. “Geekerella, you don’t have a choice.”

Crap.

“C’mon,” Sage, my best friend, my worst nightmare, says with a gentle nudge, “for old time’s sake?”

I step forward and feel the silken purple fabric of my mom’s cosplay dress. Sage has altered it quite a bit since the first time I wore it. The jacket is a bit more refined, the epaulettes sparkling like gold, and underneath all of the organza and crinoline are tiny wire lights that shimmer and sparkle blues and purples and pinks, like a galaxy trapped inside the seams.

And I remember how I felt in it. How happy I was.

I’ve been chasing that high for years now, trying to catch it in small pockets. I tried to find it in writing, in my dreams, in Darien, but I never did. Never could. No amount of any of them made me feel like I did in that dress, on that night, so happy I could burst.

I think that’s why I said okay. Why I let them shove me into a dress I hadn’t seen in five years and hook up me up like a Christmas tree. Because maybe I’d find it again, catch a breath of that happiness, one more time before reality set in: that I am just Elle Wittimer. That I don’t live in a fairy tale, that life doesn’t guarantee you a happily ever after. Just a happy for now.

I just want to be happy most of the time, and I was happiest with Darien but—

I don’t want him to sacrifice what he loves. Because I can’t do the limelight again. I can’t have my name in every gossip magazine. I can’t be judged for my weight or the color of my hair or the strength of my person for the rest of my life. I was already judged by that so harshly and so terribly for so many years growing up.

I can't do that again, and I can't ask Darien to give everything up.

Square peg, round hole. That's how we fit.

Which means we don't.

But for a moment, I want to pretend I'm that sixteen-year-old girl in her mother's hand-me-down dress, thinking that love was whole and beautiful and forever. Maybe not in this universe, but in another.

Certainly, still, in another.

My friends fix up my hair and paint my eyes, and I find myself standing in front of the impossible ballroom doors to the masquerade. Jess and Harper open the door.

Sage offers me her arm. She's dressed in a flouncy dress that is the most perfect color blue. "What do you say, princess?"

I take her arm and squeeze her hand tightly. "I hate you."

"You love me."

"So much."

And we put on our masks and step into the ballroom, and it's full of lights and music and people. There isn't a grand entrance this time. People don't stop and gasp and stare, but they do notice my dress and point, and Sage does give everyone one of her business cards on our way into the party. "I can make any cosplay you want! Fifty percent off if it includes a dog!"

And I love my best friends.

All of them. Jess and Harper, standing and flirting in a dark corner of the ballroom, their fingers laced together with the soft certainty of a tapestry. Imogen and Ethan challenging Sailor Darth Vader and Tuxedo Ren to a dance-off. Rosie and Vance leaning against the railing up top, playing I Spy, until someone asks Vance for a selfie and he obliges. Cal finds Sage in the mass of people, and they pull me onto the dance floor.

We're laughing and spinning and dancing with strangers, and my heart feels light and buoyant, and I feel—

I feel *happy*.

I feel like a star, bright and shining in a constellation of other stars, connecting to form a myth, a legend, a story that means something a little different to everyone.

And that's the magic of it.

I spin away from a Picard and the music changes. It slows. My hands catch so certainly into white-gloved hands. They fold between my fingers like an old storybook.

And suddenly I'm dancing with Carmindor in his familiar uniform, the perfect shade of blue, and I'm sixteen again and looking for somewhere to fit in, somewhere to unfurl all the parts of me I kept folded and hidden, and be happy.

All I ever wanted was to be happy.

"*Ah'blena*," he says softly, truly, like a secret.

"Darien," I whisper, my voice betraying me as it wobbles. "I—I'm sorry about you and Kate." Because it was my fault, wasn't it? Because I drew the line too close. I—

"Don't be. It was my choice. It had nothing to do with you."

"Nothing?"

"Nothing that's your fault," he replies. "I just realized that I'm still in love with my best friend."

Oh, *no*.

I—I can't do this again. I won't do this again, but as soon as I release his hands and turn to leave, he gently catches my wrist. "Please," he pleads, "hear me out?"

And he takes off his mask and shows me the face I could recognize after a hundred years of solitude, a face I would love to wake up to every morning forever.

My heart twists. "Darien . . ."

The song is slow, and the beat is soft enough that I can hear him over the music, and I wish I couldn't, and I'm so glad I can.

He takes a deep breath and takes my hand in both of his. "You make me happy, Elle. You always have, you always will. Your successes, your faults, your weird little laugh—all of you makes me so, so happy and I—I'd leave Hollywood for you. I'd stop acting. I'd try something new—start a food truck. Sell bacon sandwiches by the boardwalk if it means I can be with you—if it means we can be happy together."

Oh, but that's exactly what I'm afraid of.

"That's not how this is supposed to work," I reply, my voice wobbling. I can feel the pinprick of tears in my eyes. "You shouldn't have to sacrifice everything you love—"

"I know, but I'm telling you that I *would*. I'm telling you that you mean more to me than all those other things combined. And I'm sorry that I didn't see it before, that I was asking you to sacrifice things. That's on me, and I'm so very, deeply sorry." He tightens his grip on my hand, staring down at it like it's the last lifeline he has. Then his eyes find mine. Tears balance on the edge of his long black lashes. "I want to meet you in the middle. You are my universe, *ah'blena*. You're my sun and my stars and the orbit I want to be in for the rest of my life. I am happiest with you in my life. With you a part of it. I want to share everything with you—that is what makes me happy. I don't care what we share, I just want it to be with *you*."

My bottom lip wobbles as I pull my hands away. I am also happiest when he's with me. I'm happiest when I can share my accomplishments with him, when I can cry with him, when I can laugh with him. I want to share champagne with him on a crappy floral couch and bat Pot Roast and Chutney away from our take-out Chinese and I want to watch reruns of *Starfield* together and

I want to sleep cuddled together and I want to wake up together with his fingers tangled through my hair and I want to *live* together.

But . . .

No, I tell myself. *You're your biggest obstacle. Meet him halfway.*

I *want* to meet him halfway. I want to try.

So I take his face in my hands and look up into his soft brown eyes, and my heart is beating so fast and so bright that I can hardly breathe. "I *love* bacon sandwiches," I say, and reach up on my toes to kiss him for the first time in an eternity.

"Once more?" he asks against my lips. "Can we try one last time?"

Because it will be the last. There won't be another. I'm certain of it. "I always did like a good reboot," I reply, and he picks me up in his arms and spins me around the ballroom like a binary star gliding through the universe.

And we are happy.

THE END