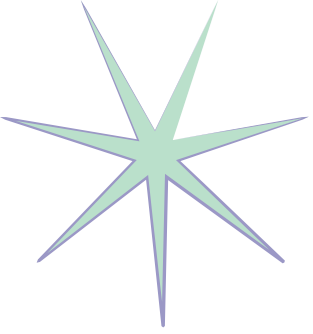




r.l.wicke
the *song* of the *stars*



I was a water carrier when I met Hosea. I knew of his kind. We called them light bearers or runners or strong men. Android servants of a form so advanced that no one knew what made them tick. Hosea never had to plug in or be refueled. Like the others of his kind, once a week he would stroll to the misty shore of the Atlantic and sit cross-legged on the pier, soaking in the sun and moonlight for 18 hours. As far as any of us knew, that was all his kind needed, all they would ever need.

Hosea was different from the rest of his kind. They all looked alike. Six foot two, two hundred and fifty pounds of bulk, give or take forty pounds, and Hosea was on the lower end of the spectrum. Like men, they were a range of different colors and personalities. Most of them were serious-minded, but Hosea seemed to never stop laughing. He found everything funny, from the curly blonde hair of children to the endless tweeting of the cardinal.

The day we met, he was kneeling in front of the well - the same well I was hauling water back and forth from - inspecting an oversized green praying mantis.

“What is it?” he asked me.

“Don’t you know? It’s a praying mantis.”

“Preying like a hunter or praying like a supplicant?”

“What’s a supplicant?” I asked him.

“One who asks of God,” Hosea said.

“That one, then,” I answered.

“Why is it called so?” he asked.

“Look at the hand things. They’re folded like in prayer.”

“Wise little beast.”

“Seriously?”

He cocked his head. “Do you not pray, Miss... what is your name?”

“It’s just Jasmine. Not Miss Anything. And I pray... sometimes. But I wouldn’t have expected you to call that wise.”

“And why not?”

“You’re a machine. You can’t be superstitious, can you? Aren’t you made of logic and metal and science stuff? I’m sorry if I sound ignorant; I don’t know much about it.”

“I see what you mean. Miss Jasmine, I am created. I know who created me because his name is written into my circuitry.”

“What’s his name?”

He waved my question aside. “Perhaps I am being metaphorical or perhaps it doesn’t go into English. I do not know, Miss Jasmine. That is not important. Perhaps the name of the one who created you is written into your circuitry, too.”

“It’s not. Sorry.”

“Perhaps you simply do not understand the language.”

“I think not. If someone has created me, he made a bad job of it.”

“No. That can’t be.”

“Yes, Mr. Robot. My creator made my back curved. It hurts when I walk or when I sit or when I lie down. It always hurts.”

“You’re assuming the pain is unintentional.”

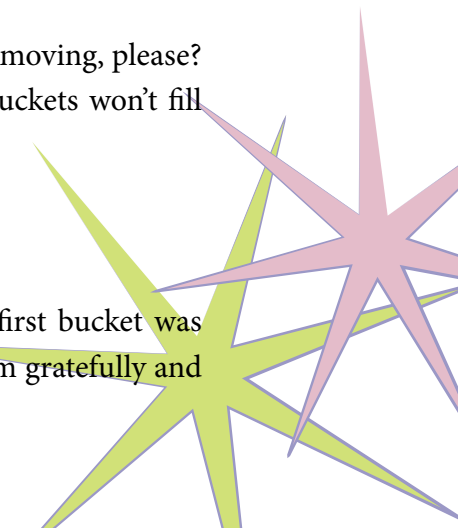
“Or cruel, Robot-boy. There’s always that possibility. But what I’m really saying is that the pain just is. It wasn’t intentional or unintentional, because I wasn’t created, I just happened.”

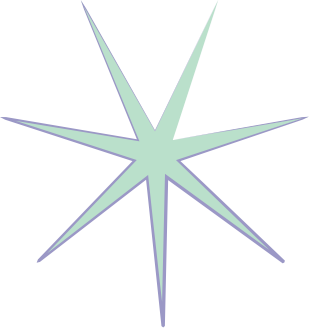
“Or maybe the pain is an integral part of your design, Miss Jasmine. Perhaps it was needed it to give you such a sweet spirit.”

Now I laughed out loud. “Obviously we haven’t met before. Would you mind moving, please? I need four more buckets of water to fill this cart for Mr. Green and the buckets won’t fill themselves.”

“Please allow me.” He gestured for the bucket.

“Oh, thanks. Aren’t you busy?” His hands moved inhumanly fast and the first bucket was full before I would have had it dropped down into the well. I took it from him gratefully and tipped the cold, clear liquid into my cart.





“Not at all. I have to go for my recharge cycle in two hours, but the judge let me out early. There wasn’t much to do. This bucket is full again.”

“Thanks, robot.”

“It’s Hosea.”

“Sorry?”

“My name is Hosea. And most people call us strong men, rather than robots. Are you expressing a disdain for my people?”

“Oh. I’m sorry, Hosea. Nervousness, rather than disdain. I’ve never spoken to a strong man before. I’ve seen - I’ve seen you around, of course. I saw one of your kind mow a man down in the streets once. He was running from a judge and the judge didn’t have a gun on him so he called for one of your men to tackle him, I guess. He died.”

“I apologize for causing you nervousness, Miss Jasmine. That was not my intention. Have you ever seen a recharge cycle?”

“Just Jasmine. And no, I can’t say that I have.”

“Come with me. It is peaceful. There will be twenty of us. I have one of the smaller shifts. After you see a recharge cycle, you will have no further desire to fear us.”

“I have to work.”

“Work is more moving of the water?”

“Yes. I have to fill the cart ten more times today before I can rest.”

“Where do you take the water?”

“Five blocks away. The nicer part of Harlem. A rich family lives there and they pay me to fill their tanks twice a week. More often in the summer. It’s honest work.”

“This takes you all day?”

“Yes. Two days a week. I assist on a farm the other days.”

“Which other days?”

“All the other days, Hosea.”

“No recharge cycle for your body?”

“No, Hosea. If I don’t work, I don’t eat, and I like eating every day.”

“If I help you finish your water today, will you come with me, Miss Jasmine?”

“You said you had to leave in two hours.”

“That is true.”

“Won’t that be a problem?”

“Perhaps, Miss Jasmine, but I think we can find a way to pass the extra hour.”

I laughed. “You think you can do it in an hour?”

“If I can, will you travel with me?”

“I don’t believe it. You can’t be that fast.”

“Try me, then.”

“Fine, I will.”

Forty-five minutes later I was walking leisurely with Hosea toward the seashore.

“What is this, Hosea?”

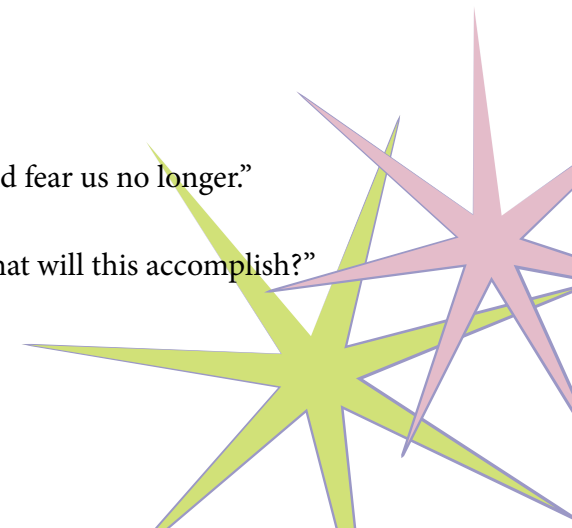
“This is a human woman, Zeph. Her name is Jasmine.”

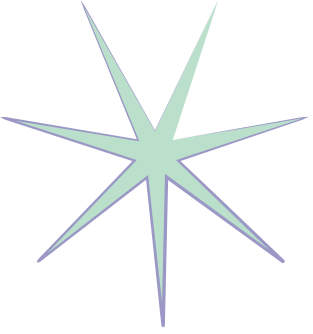
“I can see that she is human. Why have you brought her here?”

“She fears us, Zeph. I wanted her to see a recharge cycle, so she would fear us no longer.”

“You believe observing a recharge cycle will reassure her, Hosea? What will this accomplish?”

“She will understand that we are not instruments of violence.”





“We are instruments of violence. We were created proficient in ten schools of armed and five of unarmed combat. We are stronger, quicker, smarter, and more imaginative than the human race. We were created to be subjugated to them and yet to dominate for them. We are not cradle-rockers or seed-planters, Hosea. We were not created to create. We were created to destroy. Or perhaps you have forgotten-“The tall man caught my gaze and stopped talking mid-sentence.

The core of my body grew cold at his words. I wished I hadn't come.

“Not only,” Hosea said softly. “We were also created to exult and to exalt. I have functions which stir my thoughts into a frenzy of delight and cause involuntary verbal expression.”

“Yes, you are able to laugh. We all possess a degree of humor, Hosea. Yours seems to be stronger than the average. Just as Brutus is the strongest and Hermes the quickest and Eleazar the most verbally fluent, you have the strongest capacity for enjoyment. We will talk on this more later. I feel my processing power dwindling. It is time. Human, come here.”

I stood before him and my knees buckled. The ease I felt speaking with Hosea earlier had disappeared and my terror of these talking machines had returned.

“Human Jasmine, we are about to enter our recharge cycle. Few humans have seen this. You will find it astonishing. When we cycle down, we will enter maximum solar absorption. Before the plague, if you walked in New York City at night you could not see the stars. Do you know why?”

“No, sir.”

“There is no need to call me sir, human. We are not above you in any way.”

“Except height,” Hosea pointed out with a deep chuckle. The other silenced him with a dark glance.

“In those day, New York was so flushed with electric light that the stars appeared dim by comparison. Your eyes would have grown so accustomed to brightness that the stars would disappear into and be overwhelmed by the blackness of the night.”

“That sounds amazing.”

“It was. It was glorious in one way of thinking, and sad in another way. But what you will see today will have the opposite effect. Our bodies will absorb the surrounding sunlight so

efficiently that the area around you will dim into the deepest darkness of night. You will not be able to fight this darkness. If you point your pod's light, we will absorb this light, too. At first you will be afraid. Why Hosea thought this would reassure you, I do not know. But the human body is capable of adapting to the most extreme use of its senses, and after an hour your eyes will grow accustomed to the darkness. Though it will be noonday you will begin to see the stars. At first they will look as they always do, but then you will begin to see farther away galaxies and nebulas, which your eyes have never seen. You may or may not be afraid of this. The response will depend on your individual chemistry. If you are able, do not be afraid. There is no danger inherent in seeing the stars or in sitting in the darkness. It may help to whisper to yourself or to sing songs or to address your creator. If the glory becomes too much to bear, simply walk in the direction of the city. The effect lasts only a mile in any direction and it will end in twelve hours. It begins. Hosea, sit.”

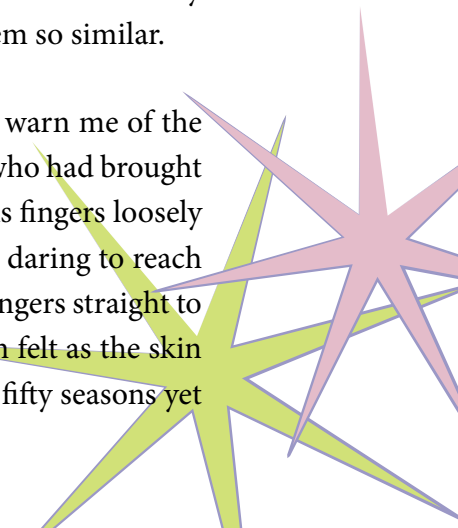
“Wait. Jasmine, Listen.” Hosea's voice was slowing down. “We will look dead, but we will not be. Fear not. We will appear to be asleep, but we do not sleep. If danger approaches, sit very close to me. When my emergency protocols sense the danger, I will rise and defend you. I am quicker than-”

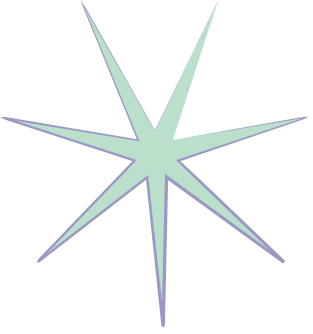
The taller man chuckled at Hosea's words, but his face froze mid-chuckle. Hosea reached his hand out to me, and then froze with his hand hanging in the air. The hand dropped to his side.

My senses called their stillness sleep, not death. I was not afraid. Their massive chests rose and fell and their closed eyelids danced as ours do in sleep. The light began to dim, so I walked to a small patch of woods nearby and relieved myself, then returned to walk between the sleeping giants. Nearly two dozen of them sat cross-legged on the pier, lined up as neatly as toy soldiers. Their faces had relaxed into serene expressions.

I studied them in the dying light, satisfying years of curiosity. Hosea was right. Immobile they did not frighten me. Their faces were less alike than I had assumed. There were more shades of difference than just the colors of their skin. The crystal hues of their eyes ranged from deep black to crystal blue. Their mouths, noses, and chins were different in shape and size. They were less like machines and more like the male side of a football match. Only the uniformity of expression and dress and the intensity of their position had made them seem so similar.

The strong men had mentioned the growing darkness but they had failed to warn me of the cold. Apparently they were absorbing the heat, too. I walked back to the man who had brought me there that day. His face was still frozen in a mask of irrepressible mirth, his fingers loosely separated as they had been reaching toward me. I hesitated a moment before daring to reach out and touch his cheek. It was hot - hot enough to send a warning from my fingers straight to my brain. I ignored the warning and ran my fingers down his cheek. His skin felt as the skin of a man: rough but soft, firm but pliable. Baked in the sun of a hundred and fifty seasons yet





seemingly ageless.

Night descended on the pier and I began to shiver in earnest. I was not afraid, not yet at least, but I knew that if I did not leave soon the cold would make me sick. I looked over at Hosea. He wore the same dark suit as his comrades - tidy black slacks, pressed white dress shirt, wide red tie, and the thick black suit jacket over all of it. I lifted one of his mighty arms - I was unsure whether it would budge, but it moved as easily as the arm of a man asleep (don't ask me how I know this). I slid the sleeve of the coat off of his arm, then, moving quickly did the same to the other arm and pulled the jacket off of his body. I wrapped the jacket around myself. The heat that had suffused from Hosea's skin enveloped me and I felt my tensed muscles melting. I sat down next to Hosea and then, on a whim, settled cross-legged with my back - wrapped warmly in his jacket - leaning against his. The warmth of his body passed gently into mine.

I could see nothing now, but still I was not afraid. I did not whisper in to the dark, nor sing, nor say prayers. I simply looked and looked and for that reason, I believe, I became accustomed to the blackness quite quickly. Soon, as the tall one had said, I began to see the stars. An ordinary amount at first, then more, then still more until I was dazzled. The stellar formations seemed to take on other colors - pale greens and blues, soft purples and pinks, and dazzling, diamond whites - and swirl together like paint. They seemed to sing. An entrancing quiet had fallen over me with the darkness and that was being displaced, too, by a lyrical humming, like faraway crickets, but low and warm and soothing. So soothing that I began to nod off. With my eyes closed, I could still see the majesty of the spheres, and they danced and sang to me in my dreams.

"You see? Humans can adapt to anything."

A deep, laughing voice pierced the fog of my dreams. "You have disarmed me, little human."

I opened my eyes with some difficulty. The splintery surface of the wooden pier was pressed into my cheek. My sides were stiff. I struggled to my feet.

"I slept? Why is it still night?"

"You slept in my jacket and lying against my body. Surely no human has ever done such a foolhardy thing before." His eyes were slit and shiny with laughter, his granite cheeks were shaking with it.

"I'm sorry. I was cold."

"Don't be sorry. We failed to warn you. It was a gross error on our part."

"Your part, Hosea." The taller strong man walked up behind Hosea and put his hand on his shoulder. He seemed more animated than he had previously. "You brought the human. I would not have been so foolish." He extended his gigantic hand to me. "My name is Zephaniah and I remember that you are Jasmine. You are to be commended for falling asleep during the recharge. And also for taking Hosea's coat." He seemed quite amused. "That was wise, and also brave for one who supposedly feared us. The human body is capable of adapting to the most extreme use of its senses. "

"Thank you," I answered. I had no idea if that was what was expected or not.

"Now, Hosea, you must return your little friend to her home."

"Now? Am I denied parlay, Zeph?"

"The human cannot stay. Her kind are not privy to our council."

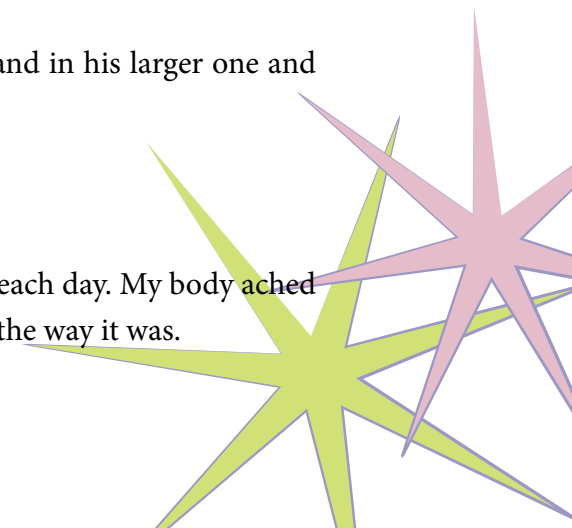
"But the girl-"

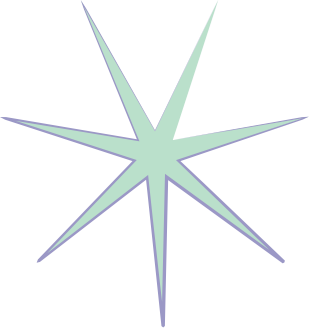
"We will discuss it no further, Hosea. I have only so many cycles of tolerance for your irregularity. We will be speaking of things that a human could not comprehend, even if it were permitted. Stay with the girl at her home during the full time of the council if it pleases your eccentricity. I will meet you back at our post and update you personally of anything relevant."

Then something unexpected happened. The strong men embraced each other simultaneously, a straight-armed, masculine hug that lasted more than a few seconds. The look on their faces took my breath from me - an exchange of deep filial affection that I couldn't imagine was programmed. It was at that moment that I began to believe there was more to the strong men than complex programming, designer alloys and synthetic flesh.

Or perhaps it was when, on the long walk home, Hosea took my hand in his larger one and laced his fingers through mine.

I told Hosea that I worked seven days a week, for eight to ten hours each day. My body ached at the end of every day. Some days worse than others, with my back the way it was.





Hosea's days, though, were very different from mine. Although he was allotted one day a week to recharge his body, his spirit was always at work. After my eight hours I was allowed to go home and think no more of work until the next day. By contrast, the strong men patrolled in eight hour shifts – eight hours on, eight hours off. They required no sleep – the recharge took care of the kind of physical refreshment that sleep gives to us humans. During their eight hours off they discussed work in their bunks. They played games of chance while discussing tactics, sparred in unarmed combat, and cleaned – their clothes, their weapons, their bunks.

Hosea's thurma – the strong men's own word for what the judges called their militias – was a bit irregular. They patrolled the safest jurisdiction and they reported to the man they called the commander, the seventh judge.

Why the judge of the quietest jurisdiction was their commander, Hosea never told me. I had heard a rumor that the seventh judge had found the whole lot of them, languishing in a storage facilities on the docks, and that they had attached themselves to him since that day. I asked Hosea if that was true, but he only laughed. The only point he would clarify for me was that none of them were leader above another. They rotated leaders of each thurma – they called him the Decurion, and his job was organizational, rather than authoritarian - annually. Hosea had been the leader a few years ago and would not be again for a long time. He was glad of that, he said.

I believe that if Hosea had been in one of the more troubled J.D.s I would have never seen him again. As it was, our hours off did not always correspond. Sometimes I would not see him for days. Other times I would see him for eight hours straight, in the early evening and into the night, and then he would show up at the farm eight hours later to help me with my labor. Senor Valdez, the farmer, seemed bemused by the occasional appearance of a strong man among his laborers, and he warned us that he wouldn't pay extra, but the work was done so quickly and efficiently that he usually did. Then we would sit around on hay bales, drink ginger beer, and Hosea would tell us all funny stories about the judges and the things they had to do to make them happy.

Happiness. It rippled across my life like a brisk thunderstorm across the fields of corn outside the city. One such thunderstorm had cut the day's work short. Everyone else had hurried home at the first rumble of thunder. But I was not afraid of thunder – nor anything else while Hosea was at my side. I had seen him kill a bear that wandered too close to the fields, then drag the carcass himself down to the farmer to butcher for meat and lard and whatever else it is a hunter does with a body. What could a little storm do to us?

We stayed in the barn after the others had gone, drinking our ginger beer and telling stories like all the other days. The laughter was warmer, more familiar, more promising. After I had shared a particularly gut-busting story, Hosea's face grew suddenly serious.

"I have a strange desire, little human," he said suddenly. "But I do not know what you will say to it. I have a way to find your answer without hurting you. I wonder if that would be better."

"I don't understand."

"You're not meant to. We don't speak of it. But I can't find your answer without hurting myself. And I think anything else would be... cheating, somehow. The more I think like a human, the less anything makes sense."

"Hosea, I can't imagine that you want anything that I haven't already thought of. I'm sure – I mean, if there's anything I can do to encourage you..." I put my hand on his cheek. I had imagined him kissing me many, many times. I had touched his hand, his arm, his cheek, and all were so lovely, I was sure that his lips would be the same. "Hosea..."

"Jasmine... I want to make you my wife. The laws of humans would not extend to me, but the laws of my people would recognize such a union. My Decurion has granted permission and will speak words of unity over us. I spoke with the judge..."

I couldn't answer, I was shaking so badly.

"I have hurt you," he said. His eyes were stricken with grief.

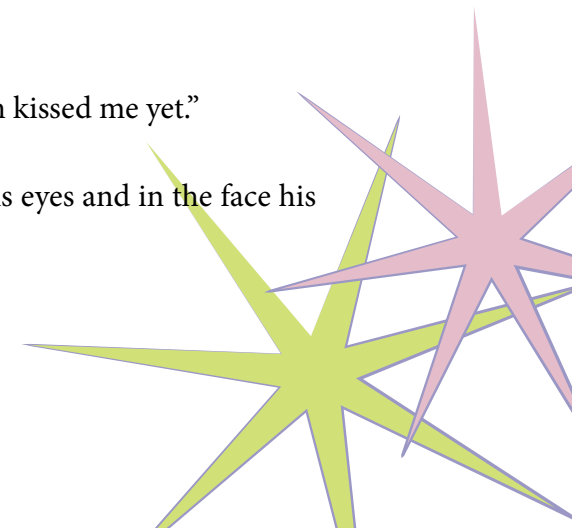
"No, Hosea. what did the judge say?"

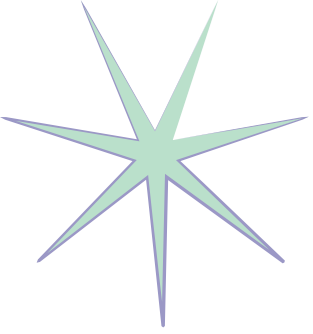
"He said there was no precedent for it, and he couldn't do anything legally, but he would allow me to have my own bunk and you could live there with me. We could be our own family, if we wished. He had other questions – physiological questions, psychological questions. He wishes to meet you. But he had no objections. If anything, he seemed amused. Why do you tremble, Jasmine?"

"I don't understand, Hosea. You want to marry me? You haven't even kissed me yet."

"I didn't wish – it didn't seem - "But he wanted to, I could see it in his eyes and in the face his face was bending to mine even as he protested.

"Kiss me, you stupid robot."





Before and after our marriage, I pelted him with many, many questions about the origins of the strong men. All I could think of. Things everyone wanted to know. Things I might need to know if I was going to spend my life with him. Most of them he could not answer. Many he would not.

But one night, laying with my head on his chest, he placed his large hand on the side of my head. “You have asked many things about my people, Jasmine, about the origin of our people, our structure, about whether I can get you with child, but never the one question that really matters.”

“Oh, yeah?” I rolled over and looked into his face. “Tell me, then, metal-boy, what is the question that really matters?”

“Am I alive?”

At first I couldn't decide if he was asking me, or if he was telling me what the question was. I didn't know how to respond.

“What I mean is, do I have a soul? Am I mere software controlling a puppet?”

I sighed. “I never asked that because it's a stupid question, Hosea. You're not a puppet.”

“But how would you know that? You're only human, after all.”

I sat up sharply in bed. “Only human?”

“I didn't mean – I meant no insult. Your nervous system and your observational capacity-”

“Are only human. Say it again, Hosea.”

“You are only a human,” he said obediently.

“Maybe I am only a human. But it doesn't take super-senses to see that you are not only a machine, Hosea.”

“You are correct – I am alive, but how could you-“

I slammed the door to our bunk before he could patiently explain to me why that the expletive I yelled behind me was physiologically impossible.

That was the worst fight we ever had.

As to the question of whether he could get me with child, as he so delicately put it, I soon knew the answer. I didn't share the news with Hosea right away. I was afraid and I wanted to let my body put some work into the job before I told anyone else. But I decided quickly that it was a girl, and that we would call her “Josie,” a too-cute amalgamation of both of our names.

I kept working at the farm and Hosea kept up with his patrolling duties. The only real difference in our lives was sleeping together in the warm, comfortable room in the judge's palace. It was a good difference.

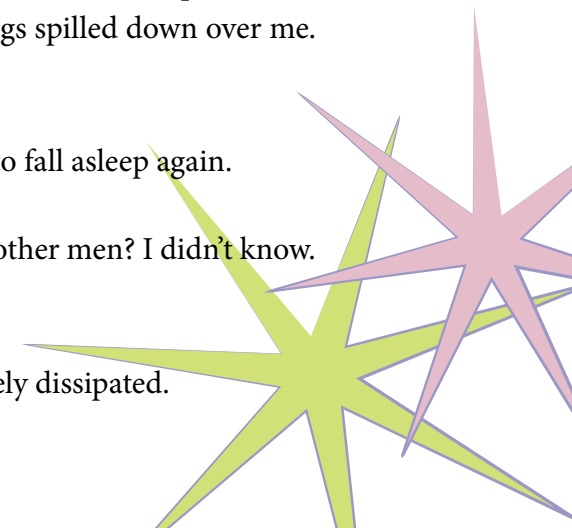
But my back still hurt, and sometimes I had to walk home from work by myself. Hosea had tried to straight my spine for me – what a fun exercise that had been – but with no results. If anything, my back was getting worse. So on this particular day, another storm was on the horizon. Lately the farmer would drive me back as far as the borders of the J.D. on his hay cart to save me having to walk on the broken glass and concrete that made up the journey between the farm and home. It was Hosea's recharge day and the walk to the pier was only an extra two miles over the walk home. I decided to head over there and see the stars one last time. I wondered if their absorbency would apply to lightning, too, and if the stars would shine through the thick clouds.

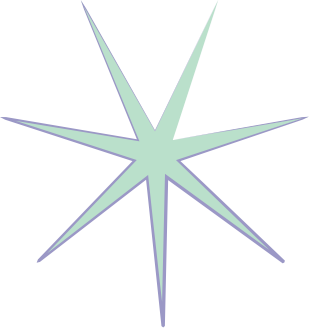
The storm increased in intensity as I neared the pier. Already darkened by the storm, it was nearly pitch black and it wasn't noon yet. It didn't matter, though. I had spent many sleepy days here and I knew my way around by hand as well as by heart. I passed through the small patch of woods. When I could hear their collective breathing between the rumbles of the thunder I knew I had reached the pier. I climbed underneath the pier, where it was still sandy and nearly dry. The heat of two dozen super-absorbent bodies radiated down into the little space and I could see the brilliance of the galaxies through the cracks. Their songs spilled down over me. Hosea was near, I knew, and I was not afraid. I soon fell asleep.

I woke with great reluctance and to such great pain that I struggled to fall asleep again.

“Jasmine, no, stay awake!” It was Hosea's voice – or was it one of the other men? I didn't know. I sunk back into the darkness.

When I floated back into consciousness again later the pain had barely dissipated.





“-crushed. –significant loss of blood. –prognosis. –out there?”

“Hosea?” I creaked. I couldn’t see. A large hand was pressed into mine.

“I’m so sorry. Lightning struck the pier. The recharge cycle was interrupted. We were on emergency protocols and I didn’t sense you there, I – I’m so sorry. Why didn’t you want to go home?”

“I wanted – to see you and – to see the stars again.”

“It was raining.”

“I wasn’t afraid.”

“You should have been. I’m sorry, Jasmine.”

“It’s okay, Hosea. You’re only human.” I tried to kiss his hand, but I didn’t have the strength, and soon the stars were singing me to sleep again.

“Why?”

“You ask me why, Hosea? You choose to love something as fragile and temporary as a human body and then you ask why when it passes into eternity?”

“I did not choose, Zeph. I saw. I loved. There was no choice. I have reviewed the beginnings and I cannot find a choice, nor any logical causality that would have dictated a circumstance beyond choice. I can find no reason whatsoever.”

“Every minute you spent with her was a choice, Hosea. How you felt may have been accidental, but the investment was intentional.”

No words, just the sound of rough breathing and tears.

“Stop this foolishness, Hosea, was your life not enriched? You made a child, though you never held her. You have memories that none of us have, experiences that all of us long for...”

Hosea looked up and met his friend’s eyes. “You are envious?” Surprise tempered the grief which broke his voice.

“We all are. Have you not seen that?”

“I don’t understand.”

“You ask why this death, Hosea? The rest of us ask, why this longing? If we were created to deal death and destruction, why were we bestowed with a desire to be praised by humanity? Why do I strive for the individual recognition of the imperfect human who was given to us for commander? Why is my heart lifted by the rare kindness of a human smile pointed at my face? Why do I want to join sides with them, tears apart their barriers, condemn their faults, dethrone their oppressors, then lead them to victory and equality in precisely the ways that we have been forbidden to do?” Zephaniah looked away from his friend and up at the sky. “And why, at the most inopportune times, am I overcome with the most unseemly ache to taste the warm, brown skin of a human female?”

“Even you, Zeph?”

“All of us, Hosea. We do as we are commanded. We carry this burden and we serve them as has been written into these bodies. But you are not alone in your suffering, my friend. Indeed, you are the only one of us to this day who has come close to the glory. You are lucky. Your integrity has not been compromised. None of the sacred laws have been broken. The creator shines on you. Cry if you must. I was wrong to chide you. But let joy mingle with your sorrow. As for the loss of your human, their bodies are temporary, but their death is a seed planted into the ground. You will meet her again, in whatever form eternity holds for her. You will hear her voice in the song of the stars. And when you do, her soul will recognize you. I am certain. Fear not, my friend.”

The two men embraced as brothers do.

