

making out, and went on back to a patio. She collapsed into a chair under a broad umbrella.

“Avoiding mortals?” a low voice asked. It belonged to a tall, curly-haired boy with a crooked smile.

She felt her face turn beet red. “No,” was the cleverest thing she could think to say.

“Good,” he said, and sat down. He bowed from the waist up. “John.”

“I see that,” she said, nodding to his DARtag. Then realized that sounded rude. She didn’t know whether to fold her hands or stick them in her pockets. She fixed her ponytail instead.

He didn’t seem to mind. “Should I pretend I don’t know who you are and didn’t walk over here so I could tell my friends I talked to one of my favorite EvenStar candidates? Or would you rather I act, you know, chill about it?”

Asuka was flustered. “You make me sound fictional.”

He laughed. “Aren’t you? Do you get out in the real world much?”

“Fair point.” Asuka admired his (probably not actually) green eyes and thought, *Maybe I should ask him to kiss me.* Because she had never kissed anyone before, and he was cute enough. She could, at least, check it off the list. Except he was likely live streaming all of this.

She leaned back in her chair.

“Tell me something about yourself that isn’t in your public profile,” he said, inching his seat closer to hers, which was both thrilling and terrifying.

She considered and discarded the parade of things that came to mind: about Luis and the space games they used to play, the beautiful obentō for school her mom used to make her, how she felt when she spotted a bird in real life. “You first.”

“I once tried to dye my hair blond, and it turned green instead.” He didn’t even have to think about it. It was his game. He’d played it before. “Your turn.”

Her mind blanked. “Why do people care who we are, anyway?”

His face became serious, and he laced his fingers together as if he were praying. “Good question. Does it matter? Maybe we just need

something to care about. Or maybe we want to know that it's still possible to make history, even when things are happening faster than people can process."

Asuka gazed out across the pool that was shaped like a comma. "Would you go if you could?"

"No," he said. His answer was prompt and swift, like he'd thought about it before, because of course he had. Hadn't everyone? "Too many people I love."

It was the way he said *love*, like it was a cherry on a sundae. Asuka leaned forward in her chair. They weren't so far apart now.

The night sky seemed to fold over them, and she smelled something like vanilla on his skin.

"You're cute," he said.

Out of the corner of her eye, she saw Ruth and Miki chatting with an older person, and she frowned in recognition. She had seen them before, protesting outside the campus gates. The activist was a member of her mom's weirdo Save Mother Earth people.

"Do you know that person?" Asuka asked.

He followed her gaze. "Of course I do. She's our chapter president."

Chapter president. She watched the woman clap Ruth's shoulder; the two of them laughed.

She left the house with mumbled apologies. Ran first along the dark street from penumbra to penumbra of streetlamps, then walked, then called an auto.

Ruth didn't get what the big deal was. *Some of their ideas are wacky, but they're about environmentalism. What's wrong with that? Half of them are as obsessed with EvenStar as everyone else. Anyway, it's a party.*

Later back in the dorm, they had a tense conversation about it that turned into an actual fight.

"I need something more than EvenStar to believe in," Ruth said.

"You could have told me."

"No one posted about us. Marilyn made sure of it."

"Did Miki know?"

"Of course." Which stung. Ruth crossed her arms. "You're not