

SOPHIE

"I found this place," Bianca says, "where they make this drink. You will never want to drink gin-and-milk again." As if making me hate gin-and- milk is some accomplishment.

I still stick to the same main streets most of the time, because other- wise I'll get lost and Argelo will just swallow me whole. I can't get used to a place where so many people shove each other, and I can never tell who's just woken up and who's about to go to bed. I don't even know if I'm supposed to be tired, and that makes me more tired. Random people want to talk to me about Nagpur, a place I know almost nothing about.

But Bianca already knows all the best places in every neighborhood. "This is the café where they do these donuts. Abraham here is a genius at grinding the stalks and getting them just the right muddy consistency." She drags me by the arm into a wooden cavern, which reminds me of the Illyrian Parlour except they just drink coffee by the light of tiny candles. She gives me a bite of a donut, and it's incredible: sweet and crumbly, pure happiness. Abraham, a big guy with a bald head and stretched- out ears, pauses in the middle of grating some dark sticks into a bowl to wave at her.

I stare at all the people crammed onto all the seats, stools, and ledges in this thick air. Two girls squeeze onto a single oak chair, holding hands and whispering. At the table next to ours, a group of students wearing loose, torn clothing argue about the nature of consciousness, in a flurry of Argelan that I about half understand. Are we conscious because we perceive the outside world, or because we are aware of our own thoughts? One young man, with a high forehead and bony shoulders, says that by definition consciousness is the ability to act on our environment with intent, because otherwise sleep would be a form of consciousness. What about crocodiles? someone asks. The y have some kind of insectoid hive behavior, but does that make them conscious, or just a complex manifestation of instinct? I tune out this conversation, because they're idiots. And meanwhile, the two girls are kissing, right in front of the whole café. I can't stop looking at these girls, with a Xiosphanti voice inside my head blaring *Unnatural*—and then I'm ashamed to be caught staring, and I look away with my face hot. Bianca's already standing up, ready to leave.

"Here's what I learned about Argelo." Bianca stops to wave at every- one who passes on the street, and they all wave back. "People spend all their time and energy trying to live in the perfect spot, with just enough light to let you see some color. And then, once you've got your home in the light, you spend all your remaining money in bars and cafés, where it's

pitch dark.” Bianca dresses like a fashionable Argelan lady, with ribbons, silk, and lace, but people still gawp at her, especially now that she’s put a bold red streak into her lopsided black hair and started wearing luminescent makeup.

At last Bianca takes me to the place with that wondrous drink. It’s one of the hottest bars in the Knife, called Punch Face. (The name in Argelan sounds a lot like the word for “shutter malfunction” in Xiosphanti.) The darkness inside Punch Face is so thick and smoky I almost step on a famous torch singer named Marilynne.

But Bianca sees better than me, and also she knows the whole scene by heart. She talks in my ear, just in Argelan, except for a few words in Xiosphanti. “That man you almost kicked, that’s Gabriel. He’s been making a fortune speculating on sour cherries, because they are in huge demand right now thanks to being a key ingredient in this amazing drink that you are about to try for the very first time.” The drink is called an Amanuensis, and my first sip is tart, but with a fizzy sweet afterburn. “See? Forget you ever even tasted gin-and-milk. You could rob Gabriel right now, and nobody would care. Except don’t rob him in here, because I don’t want to get thrown out of my favorite club.”

Punch Face looks no bigger than the Zone House back home, as far as I can tell, without ever seeing the walls. The center of the room is taken up with a black fire, which devours light instead of giving it off—this is something they rescued from one of the old space shuttles, and it has a complicated explanation that I cannot hear over the noise. A group of musicians hunch on one side of the space, slapping a pair of drums and grinding out a rhythmic melody on guitars and a piano, with a singer hissing, “You can trust me, I want to bite you.” People dance in loose clothes that billow like the waves of the Sea of Murder. The air has a sugary tang, as if everyone is sweating out their sweet drinks.

The music speeds up. We all crush into the center of the room, arms under legs. Our torsos slide sideways across each other, and I’m going to implode with happiness. I don’t know this dance we’re doing, but I don’t need to. I follow the music and the other people, and our bodies speak to each other with heat and pressure. All my nerve endings go wide awake. We put everything we have up in the air, then fall on top of each other. I hear Bianca laugh, feel her grabbing my waist with both hands to lift me into the air. And then there’s a man nearby, with no shirt and sweat running along the ridges of his muscles. He laughs too, as his body whips between us. All my usual anxiety is gone. Everything feels brilliant. Bianca and I are alive and we’re together, here on the other side of the world, in this dark warm room full of beautiful dancers. I want to fall into this moment forever.