

Firebugs

by Nina Kiriki Hoffman



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“Esta, can you explain why you set that bush on fire?” Creche Mother Makis asked us. Two of her sibs flanked her on the judgment bench. All three stared at us, their faces expressionless, identical. Hawk noses, narrow mouths, deep-set eyes under heavy brows, their hair hidden under the white hoods of their judgment robes.

We looked at each other, six versions of Esta in identical clothes: short, muscular twelve-year-old girls with amber eyes and plaited ginger hair, wearing our favorite olive green tank tops and many-pocket khaki pants, with battered brown boots for all terrain. We consulted among us in undertalk. Esta-Playa was elected to speak, as she always was. I hadn’t said a word aloud in two years.

It was not the first time we had been sent for judgment. We sat side by side on the suspects’ bench, a level below the judgment bench. The observer and guard benches behind us were empty. The gray-green walls of the windowless room felt like a trap.

“We judged it ugly,” Playa said. “It needed to be replaced with something better.” All of us nodded. This wasn’t the real reason we set the bush on fire. Sometimes we just had to burn things. “Half of it was dead. It burned easily.”

“You caused destruction of property in a public place, endangering others and destroying what was not yours.”

“We are the public,” said Playa.

“You are part of the public, but only a small part.”

We looked at each other. We all wore the face with lips pinched together, and faint frown lines between our eyebrows. We knew that before we looked. Sometimes we looked at each other anyway. We liked seeing ourselves.

“This is your second offense,” Mother Makis said. “One more, and you will have to go to reconditioning.”

Transia said reconditioning wasn’t so bad, one of us undertalked.

After they'd been through it, said someone else. Who trusts people who have already been reconned?

Next time we need to pick a better target, one where they won't catch us doing it, thought one of us.

There can't be a next time, thought someone else.

I didn't say anything. Already I could feel the fire burning hotter in my stomach. It burned until we let it out somewhere. We always argued about where. The bulga bush on the downtown promenade in the center of Luxa, Vive's only city, had been Itsa's idea. It was small and unsatisfying to burn. I wanted to do whole fields out in the croplands beyond the edge of the city, but everyone else said I couldn't, even though farming was mostly automated, and no one would know it was us. *We can't burn food, Jixa, the others told me every time I mentioned my desires.*

There has to be a next time, one of us said. We can't live without it.

Maybe we could if we got rid of Jixa, one of us thought. It came and went so quickly I didn't know which of us thought it, but I had heard fast underthoughts like that before. Sometimes in dreams.

I looked at my sibs, breaking rank. Usually we did everything simultaneously, as most pods did: stance, expression, movement synchronized. Playa the voice for us, the rest of us her strong support, always around her. I had the rightmost position in our phalanx. If we had things to say to each other, we waited until we were somewhere alone.

Do you want to give me up? I wondered.

Who said anything about giving you up? thought four of my five sibs. A chorus, so I couldn't separate out the one who hadn't spoken. I suspected it was Sissa. We were very much the same; still, small differences had emerged. In our pod, Sissa and I were the most different from each other.

If I burn the hottest, I could probably help us by leaving. The rest of you wouldn't have this problem anymore, I thought.

We all feel it, thought Playa.

It pushes me most, I thought, and no one argued. I hadn't noticed before that I was the one who felt the burn desire strongest. It hadn't occurred to me until recently that one of us could feel something different from any of the others. Only when someone stubbed her toe or cut herself had I learned that we were not one person in six bodies, and I had denied it, even so.

"Esta?" said Mother Makis.

"Mother?" Playa said.

"You are dismissed. Do not make us see you in this way again."

We stood, all of us at the same moment, and left the room.

We had a partment in the creche until we were fifteen, one room with six beds in bunk stacks on one wall and storage for our clothes and other belongings in drawers on the other wall. The partment door that faced the hallway was painted beige, and our name was on the art screen in the center of the door. One of us had keyed it so the curly, sparkling letters were red on a pink background. I glanced at the door next to ours, which said Larnie, blue letters on a tan background, a flat font. Larnie was a year older than we were, and knew they were going to be maintenance people. There were lots of Larnie pods; everybody needed maintenance, and Larnie was a consistently reliable model.

We were the first Esta pod, and probably the last. Pods who caused trouble did not get replicated. We hadn't demonstrated aptitude for anything Vive needed. Some pods had quirks society put up with because they had lots to offer, but so far we had no marketable abilities.

We'd be okay without Jixa, someone thought, another flash of thought that came and went so quickly I didn't know which of us thought it.

I wondered if it were me.

The burn in my stomach notched up. All I could think of was fire.

One of us thumbprinted the lock open and we all went inside. Another flipped up the game screen and selected the *CityKill* game, then passed me the handpad. Another pushed my shoulder so I sat in front of the game. I lowered the visor, slid my hand into the game slot, and moved my fingers to select flamethrower and my avatar, which looked like us all. I set about incinerating every wooden building in the play city, which was on some other planet, not Vive. Our game simulations always showed places we would never go. No child was encouraged to destroy anything here at home. We never saw people who looked like us in our games, either; we always destroyed aliens.

I burned my way through the poorer sections of the simulcity. One of us summoned evenmeal from the dispenser, and one of us jogged my shoulder when it was time to sit and eat. I flamed one more structure, filling my eyes and ears and soul with the blazing crackle of flame before unhooking.

Two others of us were with me underneath, enjoying the burning, too. The other three kept some mental distance from us.

As I rewalled the game, I glanced at the others. Three would not look at me. Playa and Itsa gazed at me, so I knew which of us were with me.

"Evenmeal," said one of the others.

We sat at the same moment, in our usual order, picked up our utensils and ate synchronized bites of stew. I relaxed into the comforting routine of life as Esta. I didn't let myself think there was a rift in our pod, even though something in me itched to track down the whisperer of anti-Jixa thoughts.

We went to our regular socialization class after evenmeal. This time, our pod was paired with a Lisa pod, six slender blond girls of about thirteen, with mahogany skin and amber eyes, and a Max pod, six boys a couple years older than us, attractive, with curly dark hair, glowing green eyes, and skin like dark honey. Both Lisa and Max wore fancy tunic tops and puffy pants, party clothes, Lisa in red and Max in blue.

We looked at our own everyday clothes, pocket pants and tank tops. No one had told us this was a dressy night in socialization class.

Two of an adult Rill pod, wiry women with short black hair, dark oily eyes, and silver-pale skin, supervised class. They wore ankle-length orange dresses with green overcoats and looked like trapped flames.

We hated threesie pod pairs. It was easy when two pods socialized; each member picked an opposite, and we all faced each other, and our speakers spoke for us. With three sets of six, it was a mess unless we set groundrules.

We tried. We made our usual plan when confronting a situation like this: Three of us would speak with members of the Lisa pod, and three with members of Max. We needed a second speaker, and elected Itsa to speak with Max, while Playa would take care of Lisa.

Then the adult Rills mixed it up even more by having us split into six pods of three, one of each member in the minipods.

We were meeting in the big social room, which had many scattered podnests, sets of six comfiseats facing each other in rings around the room, tables in the center of each ring with dispensers that could supply snacks and drinks. Someone had already dialed snacks for each table, and chosen a wall pattern of creamy white with blue and indigo paisleys in mixed sizes. The salt and flour combination of fresh-baked pretzels scented the air. The drinks, milky pink with foam on top, were in tall glasses with ripples down the sides, were malted quillberry, one of our least favorite tastes ever. The sick-sweet scent of the drinks almost destroyed our pretzel joy.

They want us buzzy, thought someone.

Jilty, thought someone else, agreeing. We had met Lisa before, and we didn't get along with them. We crushed on Max.

"Separate," said Rill together.

We touched hands with each other and went to separate podnests. Lisa turned their backs on each other and followed suit, and Max tilted their head, grinned at each other, and split up as well.

I mindchecked my other selves and we all sat down at the same instant, all crossed our right ankle over our left knee and leaned back into the cushion of the leftmost chair in each nest. Max and Lisa settled in synchronized fashion as well.

Everyone waited. Both Rill sighed. “Max. Say something to start the conversation,” they said, and each dark head in the nests leaned forward a little, grabbed a pretzel, and said, “Snacks, girls. How about it?”

I grabbed a pretzel, too, and felt my others do it at the same time. We all loved pretzels. I licked a salt crystal on mine, and felt the shared taste of us all doing that.

Lisa picked up a glass of quillberry malt and took a sip that turned into a slurp.

We laughed, but only inside. We weren’t supposed to mock others.

Why did they put us here with media types? thought one of us.

Right. Lisa was a newscaster, and Max was an actor who got leading roles in all kinds of dramas, from instruction manuals to movies. Everybody crushed on Max, because we’d seen him play the hero almost every time. We’d never met Max face to face before. I felt heat in my face and wished we’d brushed and rebraided our hair before we came to class.

Everybody was supposed to trust Lisa, although we had always been suspicious of her, because we’d been paired to play with a Lisa pod — maybe even this Lisa pod — when we were six, and Lisa cheated and whined a lot.

“So, Esta,” my Lisa said, “when was your last explosion?”

Nobody else’s Lisa was saying that. I heard murmurs from the other nests, some Max’s voice, some Lisa’s voice, all questions, but I couldn’t keep track of them all at the same time, even with undertalk. I lost my others in the flood of differences. We had been set up.

I thought what I wanted Playa to say, but she thought, *I can’t say it for you this time, Jixa. You have to speak for yourself. My Lisa just asked me if I had my period yet, and I can’t tell her that in front of Max, but I feel like I have to answer anyway.*

I coughed. I swallowed. I even took a sip of the horrible pink stuff to wet my throat, and then I said, only it came out a whisper, “I don’t explode.”

Lisa laughed. It was like the laugh she would have when she grew up, a party laugh that sounded nice, though it had a blade in it. We had heard her older selves use that laugh on gossip broadcasts. She said, “That’s right, I forgot. It’s burning you do, right? Forgive my mistake. When was the last time you burned something?”

I reached mentally for Playa and remembered she had her own speech problems. Anyway, Rill would know about our most recent fire; all the creche adults knew, so it was no use trying to keep it a secret. I glanced at my Max, who was chomping on a pretzel and staring at me as though I were a bully he was going to beat up.

“I burned a bush on the promenade this morning,” I whispered. I choked again and chugged some more quillberry, then set the glass down and programmed the dispenser to give me a vanilla mixta.

“A burning bush. How droll,” Lisa said. She nudged Max, who smiled.

“How about you? Auditioned for anything lately?” I asked, my voice a little louder. It felt wrong to be talking. I wanted back my power of silence.

“We’re in three commercials,” Lisa said. “One of them with Max.”

“What’s that one for?” I asked.

“An inoculation for Miner’s Disease,” Max said. “You burned a bush?”

Lisa tittered. “It’s what Esta does. Burns things.”

“What kind of career is that?” asked Max. He didn’t sound adoring.

“We don’t have a career yet,” I said.

Max looked surprised.

“They’re an experimental model,” Lisa said, “and they’re not tending toward anything useful. Probably first and last of their line.”

Did you hear that? I asked my others.

What? they all said, though some were irritated at me for interrupting. One of us had engaged Max in conversation, and he was looking at us with admiration.

Lisa says we’re a dead-end line.

She is such a svix, Playa thought, and then someone else thought, *but she’s probably right.*

“I’ve known experimentals before,” Max said. “One of them turned into the best image-capturer in the biz. Lisa, you know Ogden, yes?”

“He’s experimental? He’s everywhere. I’ve met about five pods of him.”

“He was the first of his kind twenty years ago.”

“Huh.” She stared at me, then shook her head. “Not going to happen for Esta. I’ll wager with you, Max. I don’t think she’s even going to make it through reconn.”

Max cocked his head at me, the way he studied interesting but dubious things in his movies. “I’ll take that bet,” he said, and they talked it over and wagered more credit than we would make in all our lives.

“How can you fly all that away?” I asked.

“Are you saying there’s nothing you’re good for?” Max asked me.

“No,” I said. “I don’t know what the future holds, but you don’t, either. What are you going to do if you lose that credit?”

“There’s more where that came from,” Max said. He smiled at me, the kind of smile that starts the wrong kind of dreams in a person.

I so wanted to burn something.

“Like, where?” I asked.

“All Maxes have a joint bank account,” he said.

I looked at Lisa, who nodded. "Lisas too."

I glanced over my shoulder at my other selves. We were new and had no older selves to pass on credit or goods to us.

Half my other selves glanced at me. The others had their heads bent forward, listening to their Maxes and Lisas.

Did they wager money on your future? I asked us.

No.

What?

Jixa, what do you mean?

I explained the bet to the others. We each looked at our own Max, then at our Lisa.

Rill spoke in matched voices. "Bid each other good night. That's all for tonight's class."

"Thanks, Max," I said, "for believing in us. Thanks for explaining things. Good night, Lisa."

"Good night, Esta," Lisa said. She smiled her the-news-is-bad-but-I'll-live-through-it smile and shook my hand. Then she and her others and Max and his left. We pulled together, our synchronization off. I had to adjust my steps, make them longer to match my others. I had to lift my head, even though I didn't feel like it, because the rest of us did.

We stood in front of Rill. Sometimes socialization class was a test aimed specifically at our pod, and sometimes we were teaching someone else a lesson. We never knew while it was happening which was which.

"How did you do?" Rill asked.

"We are confused by some of what we heard," Playa said.

"That's life," said Rill. Both of her smiled at us. "We heard all of you speaking, and that was good. That was something we hadn't observed in a long time."

Hated it, thought all my others at the same time. I didn't think it, though.

The rest of me fell asleep at the same time.

I set my cubby's ceiling for stars wheeling faster than they would if we were watching them outside, watched the dragon constellation whirl with its tail toward the pole star, and thought about pods.

Sometimes one member of a pod died, and the rest went on without that person piece. If the pod came from a long line, older members could help the members of the bereft pod weather the loss. Some pods survived with one or two or even three members gone.

Maybe it was true that I was the one with the most fire in my core. If I were gone, the rest of me would have a better chance to live long enough to find something they were useful for.

We could survive reconn. Everyone did. They didn't survive unchanged, but they survived.

There was another step when reconn failed. People whispered it sometimes, that pods that proved useless or antisocial or dangerous would be returned to a different, less conscious level of use. Compost.

I didn't want to be why that happened to Esta.

I stopped the stars and sent them away, leaving the underside of the bunk above me blank. I listened to my other selves breathe the slow comfort of sleep, and I tuned myself to hear any dreamspeech we might be speaking. One of us was dreaming of all of Esta at Career Day, where all fifteen-year-old pods went to speak to representatives from every sort of work we could do. Pods with lineage already knew what they would end up doing, but anyone mutated by design or accident had to choose. It was monumental to be the first of a pod.

My dreaming self stood with the rest of us in the midst of a crowd of our-age pods milling around on Settlement Square, a broad expanse of pale paving with shining crystals embedded in it, looking around at the elder pods. Each elder pod stood in a canopied booth with six sides, members facing outward on each side, wearing smiles. Each booth was decorated with signs of the profession of the pod: cleaning tools, cookpots, janitorial, numbers for accountants, tech tools, plants, earth, things we didn't even understand yet.

We saw a booth with a green canopy, and dangling black lines of some sort, and something that shimmered yellow and orange. A light shone from the booth into our eyes, and we turned and followed the beam to where an elder pod waited, their hands stretched toward us, their faces alight with smiles. Their faces were wrinkled and brown, their eyes dark, their hair short and silver, their forms slender, almost skeletal in their black party clothes. They looked nothing like us, nor like any pod we had ever seen, but they welcomed us. We knew then what we wanted to be —

I shut my link to my other selves. Wishes, not prophecy.

Everyone asleep turned over with the same shushing motion of covers shifting.

I slid from my bed and padded silently to the door, then eased out of the room alone.

In the hallway outside our partment, the lights were dim for night, and everything was quiet. I wandered barefoot toward the common area, which included smaller rooms for private meetings with other pods and the big social room where we had our socialization class every evening. I passed both these rooms and slipped

into the natal section, where parental pods tended to decanted baby pods after they came out of their vats.

Clear walls of the entry hall had vats behind them, with faint light shining through the greenish amniotic fluid in which the babies floated in their shared placental sacs. The hall itself was dim and shadowy so as not to interfere with eye development of the fetuses. I stopped and studied a six-month pod, six small floating babies with one big membrane around them, nutrients snaking through one tube that split into six once it entered the placenta and fed into their navels. They hung head down, their eyes closed. Their heads were almost as big as the rest of their bodies. Their torsos were rounded, but their arms and legs were bent sticks with fingers and toes at the ends. They all twitched in unison, kicked at the fluid that held them suspended.

I continued down the hallway, passing vats containing pods in every state, from invisibly microscopic to almost ready to be decanted.

The door at the end of the hallway led to the baby-comfort room. I opened it and peeked in.

Six Mother Cara were cuddling a pod of newborns. One Cara looked up at me. When pods went adult, they stopped moving so in synch with each other, depending on their occupation. Cara was independent, but her person parts were always doing similar things, so it was hard to tell. The one who looked at me held an index finger to her lips, and I nodded. She patted the comficouch cushion beside her. I sat next to her. The other Cara glanced at me, then refocused on the infants.

I leaned against Cara's shoulder. She was a large woman, with softness and strength all through her, comforting to lean against or be hugged by. I hadn't touched a Cara in ten years, but I still remembered her powdery scent and her care, the source of warmth and calm and safety.

She set the baby on my lap and guided my hands to rest on its body. It stared up at me with milky eyes. I wasn't sure it was anyone I'd ever met; it still had squashy baby features, and its skin was warm and golden. It kicked and gurgled.

Cara put an arm around my shoulders. Her warmth and the smell of her — powdery and clean, with an essence of roses — reminded me of when I was so little I didn't even know words yet. Cara had been the one who kept me happy. Her hair was thick and loose and shining, and it felt soft against my cheek. The baby was warm and squirmy under my hands. It smelled a little sour.

"Just you?" Cara murmured to me, her well-remembered voice a soothing murmur.

"Just me," I said.

"Why? Why aren't you all wandering together? You're too young to be collecting differences."

I sighed and closed my eyes, leaning against her soft warmth. "I'm the one who's trouble," I whispered.

"Tell me," she whispered.

Just then, the nearest other Cara rose and came to me. She took the infant I held, and put the one she'd been holding in its place on my lap. She and the Cara cuddling me checked their time keepers and nodded to each other. She went to the next comficouch and settled with the baby.

"We all want to burn things," I murmured, "but I want it most. Burning things is not a desired trait, and it's hard for me not to do it. I think the others might be able to stop themselves, but I can't. Will they recycle us, Cara?"

Her hand stroked my shoulder, and her cheek rested on my head. She didn't answer.

"What if they just recycled *me*? Then the others could survive. It's not such a hunger to them as it is with me. Maybe without me around, they wouldn't burn anything."

She leaned forward and kissed my cheek.

Another Cara came and switched babies with me. I kept my hands still, resting them on each baby in the same places I had touched the previous one. When we were this little, it was important that we all had the same experiences.

"Sweetest," Cara said.

"Would that be all right, Cara? Can I offer myself and get them to spare the others?"

"Are you sure, Esta?"

I closed my eyes. I wanted to see us grow older, move out of the creche, and find our own place somewhere in the city. I wanted to see us thrive, find work that would give us the respect of others and helped the whole community. Perhaps we would find another pod to love. Perhaps we would travel. We had studied the brochures about vacation trips older pods earned, to the ruined alien city to the east, to the resort on the coast, to the space station at the nearest node, three weeks' sub-light-speed travel away.

I wanted to walk the hallway to the natal section of the creche and see the next iteration of our pod suspended in a vat, growing and thriving, on their way to being decanted.

If I gave myself up for recycling, I would not see any of those things.

With me as one of us, though, we might all go back to the vats. Without me, perhaps the rest of me could live to adulthood and see everything I knew we all wanted for our future.

I wanted our line to last.

"If it will save us, I will do it, Cara Ma."

She kissed my cheek again, then hugged me sideways. One of the other Cara swapped the baby in my lap with another.

“I can help you, dearest,” Cara said. “But just now, you need to be a new lap for these new ones.”

“All right.”

I stayed with Cara until I’d held each baby. Cara told me the babies were Jalcom, destined to grow into maintenance workers. I had seen Jalcom in several ages and lots of places, though usually after hours, when things were closed: Jalcom was there, cleaning, along with other common pods, Marita and Golas and Larnie.

Cara took the babies to their sleep boxes, each in his own compartment, but with openings between so they could touch each other, smell each other, hear each other. I followed Cara as they settled the babies in their boxes. The light was dim, but there were trails of brighter colors in light-dotted spirals on the walls, and a rest-work seat across from the sleep boxes, occupied by Liba Sleep Mother.

I had faint memories of when I had been in a box near all my sibs, how the sound of our breathing wove me into sleep like a cocoon.

Liba Sleep Mother would watch the babies as they slept. Cara and I went back to the comfort room.

Cara Comfort Mother gathered around me, one on either side of me, and the others facing me on nearby comficcouches. One had her arm around my shoulders, and the another rested her hand on my thigh. Her warmth, her scent, her nearness — I felt safe and small, almost as though I were floating.

Jixa, where are you? thought Playa, a sudden burst of mental sound, tinged with alarm. I felt the others waking, disturbed by her undertalk shout.

In the comfort room, I thought.

What are you doing there? When did you leave?

I am fixing things.

A mixture of undershouts, from everyone, overlapping: *What do you mean? How could you leave without us? Jixa, come back! Jixa, don’t! Whatever you’re doing, stop it. You didn’t talk to us about it! Don’t do anything! Jixa, wait!*

I pressed my palms to my ears. It didn’t help. There was no volume control for undertalk.

“If you think this is the only answer, we know who to speak to about it,” the nearest Cara said to me.

Another Cara said, “Have you talked to your pod about this?”

“No. We’re talking now.”

“How?”

“Undertalk.”

“Undertalk?” said three Cara at once.

“Is that strange?” I asked. Itsa and Playa moved closer into my head, looked out through my eyes, asking a cascade of questions, mostly: *What have you done? What have you said? What have they told you?*

“It is a treasured trait. Not everyone has it, and it is definitely something we breed for. Perhaps the next step is not necessary, Esta. There may be a chemical answer to your obsession, a way of moderating your desire.”

Did you tell her about the fires? one of us thought, anger a burning undertone.

Yes, I thought.

Jixa! thought all the rest of me.

It's not like it's a huge secret, I thought. *We keep getting in trouble for it. They know, if they've checked with Mother Makis.*

Jixa, said the rest of me, in tones varying from anger to despair.

“There’s some kind of drug that could quiet my fire hunger? Would I be the only one to take it?” I asked Cara.

One of them stroked my hair. “You raise a good question,” Cara said. “You are too young to be collecting differences, but sometimes we have to try something new. You say you have this hunger more intensely than your podsibs?”

I nodded.

“You will separate from your sibs if we treat you and not them,” murmured another Cara. “To keep you on the same path, we would need to treat everyone.”

“Has the visit here caused a rift?” asked a Cara from a nearby couch. “Is she already too different from her sibs?”

No, cried Playa and Itsa. *No,* said the other three, though not as quickly or loudly. *We are with you now,* Playa thought, *not separate.*

You missed the earlier meeting. I held a whole pod of Jalcom in my lap.

We can all do that.

They're asleep now.

We can do it tomorrow, thought Itsa. *What are you doing there? Tell us true now!*

I couldn't sleep, I thought, *and I came here. I was asking Cara if — but I couldn't tell them. I couldn't have asked about giving myself up for their survival if my sibs were with me.*

You what? Itsa cried. *You what? What were you thinking, Jixa, or were you thinking at all?*

So she didn't need me to say it. She knew what it was without that. She told the others, *She thought if she died, the rest of us might survive.*

What if she's right? asked sib Sissa, the one I twinned with least.

Yes, I thought. *What if I'm right? Each of you would do it for us, too, wouldn't you?*

They were silent.

The door puffed open, and my podsibs came in, each in a lilac nightdress like the one I wore. They marched in lockstep, tightly synchronized. They came to stand in front of me.

Come away from Cara now, thought Playa.

I stood. I couldn't disobey her, not when everyone reinforced her words. I turned, and they closed in around me, pulling me into the middle of our pod. The fire in my core, quiet while Cara had been caring for me, ignited. Sweat beaded my brow. I wanted to let the fire out.

It jumped from my center to my sibs' minds, then flowed down into their stomachs, the heat and hurt and burning. Some of them flinched visibly.

Without me, this doesn't happen to us, I thought.

That's not true, thought Playa. Her forehead was wet, too.

Don't lie, thought Sissa. *Jixa is right.*

"Esta," Cara said.

"You said there was a chemical solution that might quiet our fire?" Playa said.

"We have mood-modifying drugs," Cara said. "Is the Esta who came alone correct, though? Are you different from each other?"

"Can that happen?" Playa asked.

"Assuredly it can," said a different Cara. "Tiny shifts in any factor during your incubation and early childhood can set you on slightly different paths. It is not always a bad thing. Some pods are much more separate than others, more creative with some distance between them."

"I'm destructive," I said. "My others aren't."

"That's not true," Playa and Itsa said in stereo. "We all feel it."

"It starts with me." I had never been more sure of this. Just now I had seen it happen: my own fire, spreading to the others. Before, it had seemed almost simultaneous. I had noticed that my inner urge was stronger, and started nudging me sooner after the calm that came when we had burned something, but now I had proof that I was the initiator. "If I'm not here, maybe it won't start."

"We should talk to Rain Researcher," Cara said. "This is not our area of specialization. There may be smaller steps you can try."

"What starts you wanting to burn?" Rain asked me. We had been separated. Each of us was in a room of our own with a Rain. Clear walls let me see through to all my others, one beyond another, all talking with her Rain, Rain making notes on touch pads as they recorded the conversations.

Something in the walls prevented undertalk. I couldn't hear my other selves, and I felt edgy and frightened. The flames inside me burned higher. My face was damp with perspiration.

"This," I said. "Anything. Being upset." I glanced at my sibs. Playa was in the next room, and she looked calm and friendly. She smiled at her Rain, my favorite smile, friendly and wide, as though the person we spoke with had said something that tickled us inside. Any of us could start that smile and spread it to the others. Forming it made us all feel better.

This time, my face didn't form an answering smile.

The others were talking with their Rain, and for once, everyone wore a different expression. None of them looked hot.

"It's me," I said. "It's me! I'm the only one. Without undertalk, they don't even know the fire is here. I'm the bad one."

Playa glanced at me and noticed my heat. I saw her face glisten as the heat rose in her, too, now that she knew I had it in me. She turned and looked toward the rest of us. Itsa, in the room beyond her, glanced at us, and red flushed her cheeks, and then beyond her, Sissa, and Breya, and Axia, one after the other. Heat spread among us by vision alone.

"You are not bad." Rain tapped rapid notes onto his pad. "You have an interesting system of reactions. The complex itself is not bad or good. It is what you do with it that shades its usefulness. There may be a place on Vive for someone who wants to burn." He looked past me at an opaque wall, which had nothing interesting on it. His eyelids flickered. He returned to his contemplation of me. "You are a valuable creation that merits further study."

The urge to burn grew hotter at my core. I glanced around the room for combustibles. I was here, and Rain, and his pad; the chair I sat on, which was plain plascrete, functional and pleasing to touch, but impervious to fire; a table, which held a carafe of water, two square cups, and a variety of flavoring agents in measured packets. They might burn. They would smell terrible. Sometimes I didn't care about that. Sometimes I used the thought of being trapped with smoke and smell to restrain my impulses.

I looked at my others. All of them were in rooms with the same contents as mine, and everyone had the flushed face that suggested they longed as much as I did for some kind of fire to eat the rage out of us.

Rain tapped his pad. "We now observe that the impulse, whatever it may be, began with you, and did indeed spread to your others, even without the benefit of undertalk. Even vision can trigger it. I believe you have pinpointed an interesting aspect of your pod's operating system. I think we *should* separate you from the others for a period of time, and observe the result."

“If we were reconditioned....” I said. “Or if just *I* were reconditioned, could that cure me?”

“We don’t want to recondition you until we know more about how you operate,” Rain said. “Sometimes reconditioning smooths out what is interesting.” He looked through the clear walls at his others. The next nearest Rain, the one talking with Playa, returned his gaze and nodded. “We will try less drastic tactics first.”

I felt so hot my cheeks wanted to melt. My stomach roiled. “Good,” I said, “but right now — “ I pulled a touchspark out of my pocket and lit the lemon flavor packets. Smoke, stink, the melting of the naturally soluble packet, not much flame. It barely took the edge off my urge.

Holding cells for questionable beings were set up to confine six at a time. Six beds, six storage cubbies, six meal spots, six waste seats, six teaching and entertainment stations.

It made me wonder if some pods were more inclined toward criminal behavior. If one member committed a crime, were they all liable? Or maybe they all committed the same crime at the same time, or formed criminal teams to accomplish some task. I hadn’t ever read or seen anything about that, but the government controlled general information; there were lots of things we never heard about.

I had never had so much space to myself before. I felt lost and sad, and as though someone had cut off my arms and legs. No constant background sound of six breathing, sharing air; no scent of other selves; no brush of constant little touches, no nearby body heat. I hadn’t realized how many times an hour I reached out in undertalk to my sibs, or they to me. Always we were commenting on everything to each other — people we passed, things we saw, the state of our hunger, whether we were too warm or too cold, and what to do about it. Constantly checking with each other to make sure we all felt alike.

Thus I had spread my fire to the others, I was pretty sure, as part of the bath of continual exchange of feelings and information.

Now that I was alone, the fire had nowhere to go. Rain and the guards — a pod called Kurnu — had taken away my touchsparks, and everything else I had worn or brought to the science center. They gave me a new tunic and pants in case I had hidden or coded something destructive into my own clothes.

I had an entertainment wall where I could call up any vid or aud I wanted to look at or listen to. I could split the screens six ways and watch and hear six things at once. I could summon exercise and hobby programs. I could read any doc I wanted — everything the shared library held for people my age, anyway. I could sit at any of six stations and flex myself in hundreds of different ways; I could request any foods I

wanted from any of six delivery surfaces in the table-desk; I could set the ceiling for my preferred sky and set the room's climate for my preferred environment.

None of it satisfied me without my sibs.

I lay on the middle lower bunk, the fire burning in my center, hotter and bigger than I was. I closed my eyes and wondered why I didn't smell my flesh burning. The others weren't here to help me put the fire outside myself into something else. I wanted them. Reached for them, and stubbed my mind on the walls. I closed my eyes and lay in the center of my own fire. This might be one way I could choose — let the fire take me, save my sibs from whatever fate I had brought on myself. I imagined them in our partment at the creche, eating together, studying the day's lessons, practicing the day's skills, singing —

When we sang together we could do six parts, weave melodies into harmonies dense and full. I picked a song to sing by myself and tried a line of it, to see if fire could leave me and launch into air riding on sound, but my voice was thin without my others, naked and ridiculous, and the fire stayed inside.

Without touchsparks, I didn't know if my fire would rage hot enough to consume me. It felt plenty hot, but the hair on my arms didn't burn.

The door puffed open, and Rain came in. "How are you?" he asked.

"Burning up and alone," I said.

"Everybody gets lonesome sickness when they're separated. We can treat for that." He pulled a drug stick from a pocket and pressed it against the back of my hand before I could move. The drug hissed into me.

"But I don't want to not be lonely," I said. Loneliness was my connection to my sibs. Losing it would feel like a betrayal.

"Lonesome sickness impedes functioning," said Rain, tucking the stick back into his pocket. "We want you functioning on an optimal level. We have more interesting things to learn from you and your separation than how you get sick."

I felt wobbly and strange, as though gravity had shifted. Something spread through me, especially in my head, and then some big, gulping, gaping part of me was gone, along with most of my fire.

Rain leaned forward and peered into my face. His hair was black and short. His eyelashes were golden at the tips, brown at the base, and his eyes were muddy green. His skin was pale pink. "Settling yet?" he asked.

"I don't like this," I said. I tried to swallow a tide of discomfort, but it bobbed up into the back of my throat. Something had changed.

Sibs.

Gone.

I rolled over and sat up, then stood up, trying to find my center of gravity. I planted my feet and hugged my stomach. Sibs. Playa, Itsa, Sissa, Breya, Axia. I

could picture our face, see five of us at once in my mind. Our face shaped the wistful smile, the one we had when something we liked was over: a vid, a bowl of ice cream, a conversation with someones we found interesting.

For the first time in my life, it was like watching someone else. There was Esta pod outside of me.

I was alone, and it felt as though that was the way it should be.

I screamed.

Rain's eyebrows rose. He stepped back.

"Nontypical reaction," he muttered at his pad.

I screamed again, closed my eyes and released an uprush of sound, forlorn, angry, lost. By the time I ran out of breath, my throat hurt, and my body felt even more wobbly than it had before. I staggered, holding my head, then fell back onto the bunk with an oof of outpouring breath.

"Was that helpful?" Rain asked after some silence.

I checked. I still had a huge hole in my center where my connection to my sibs was supposed to be. I felt flickers of my fire restarting. I felt deaf because there were no whispers from my other selves helping me process my experience.

I felt...all right. Except my throat was severely sore.

"I don't know," I muttered. I got up again and went to the table-desk, tapped in a request for water. The table delivered a drink bulb. I pushed in the piercer and sipped.

"You shouldn't be able to make that happen," I muttered. "Mental surgery. It shouldn't be that easy."

Rain sat across from me at the table. "It's not easy, Esta. It's not a done thing, either; it is a temporary effect. You'll decide if you like it enough to do it again. Do you have an inside name, or should I call you Esta?"

A spike of heat pierced me. "Call me Esta," I said. Our name; all of us. In that way, at least, I could still be with my sibs.

Rain frowned and tapped his pad. "All right. Esta. Esta, it's a rough transition to singleton."

Singleton was an insult among pods, one we kept secret when we worked with offworlders, who didn't know how deprived they were. I felt a scream rising again. I sipped water and swallowed it.

"Good. Only a little flinch." He made notes. "It's very difficult to transition, but many have done it."

"They have? Why?"

"People have many reasons, most of them related to tragedies," he said. "Sometimes there is no other option. Or other options are worse. I understand from Cara that you were thinking of sacrificing yourself."

“To save my others.”

He nodded. “A good thought, but we have other solutions. Are you ready to listen to one now?”

I set my water bulb on the table and clasped my hands together, fingers weaving between each other. I wished I could hug my sibs that tight. I let air out. My fire was low inside, embers. “Yes.”

He tapped his pad and laid it on the table before me. “This is Discovery.”

A 3D vid rose from the pad. It showed the central square of an offworld town. All the buildings had gardens on their roofs, and walls of wood. The streets were beaten earth. Everyone was alone, not part of a pod. Everyone walked, but there were no slidewalks. They wore clothes like ours, and they looked the same form of human as we did, varying colors of skin, hair, and eye, varying shapes, but all with the same limbs and hands and features as we had.

Rain tapped the zoom, and our view drew in to show a social event in the center of the square.

Many singletons were gathered at tables in the center of the square, eating puffy deep-fried carmal leaves. They talked with each other, as I had seen nonpods talking with each other on permitted entertainment vids from offworld. They smiled.

They looked so sad and lonely, even though they were talking and laughing. My fire died, and tears ran down my face.

A tall, handsome man brought a bowl of something steaming over from a wooden buffet outside a store, and waited for them to make space for him at a table. He looked familiar. Green eyes, curly dark hair, honey-golden skin, and that crooked smile. Max. Hero of the Pod Revolt in *Six to Conquer*, romantic lead in *Share Our Secret*, comic actor in the series *I Know You Are, But What Are We?* The star of some of our fantasies of connection. Sometimes at night before we drifted off to sleep, we shared these thoughts in undertalk: we would find a Max pod and they would see how amazing we were, and bond with us. Playa liked two other stars, Opaline and Mariette, so we fantasized about bonding with them sometimes, but Max was my favorite.

“Max,” I said aloud. I studied the others. “And Jalcom. And Rill. But only one of each. What is that place?”

“This is Discovery. It’s just the other side of the Backbone Mountains.”

“That place is on Vive?”

“A secret city,” Rain said.

I clutched my stomach. The place where my connection to my sibs should be felt cold and hollow. “How can that be?” I whispered.

“Sometimes people have problems,” Rain said. He watched the people in the vid talking to others unlike them. He blinked and met my eyes. “You’re not the first,

Esta. When people can't be parts of pods, when something goes wrong, we send them to Discovery to see if they can find other ways of being."

I reached into the 3D toward Max. He looked like he was in his twenties, much older than the Max pod we'd met in socialization class — was it just last night? "Is he like other Maxes?"

"No," said Rain, "otherwise he wouldn't be in Discovery."

"How do people connect?" I watched them talk, pass condiments, laugh, frown, touch hands in passing. The casual brush against each other looked like a touch between members of a pod. I had not seen other people trying it. Pod to pod, when we met new people, there was a tap of the back of the hand in greeting, but unless one pod was romantically involved with another, we did not cross the divide between self and other with touch. It looked perverse. It made me long for my own past.

"There are classes," said Rain. "Some dwellers in Discovery study offworld vids and other media. They have fewer limits on content in Discovery. There's lots you can explore that you could never see if you stayed in Luxa."

I watched the singletons moving through their lives, people I had met and known, but never so alone.

"You may choose, Esta. Would you rather be reconned, or try life in Discovery?"

"My sibs?" I asked.

"No fires since we separated you," he said. "They are calmer and more productive. Less likely to be irritated. They don't need further help, it appears."

"So if I were reconned and they weren't — "

"You could rejoin them. It wouldn't be the same. In cases where one member of a pod is reconned and the other sibs are not, they lose undertalk, if they had it in the first place. They never reestablish the intimacy they once had."

Oh, that would be worse, to be with them and not one of them.

I pressed my hands against my belly. The hollow loomed there. Already I could feel the flame rising, the rage and sadness, the loneliness. I pictured my sibs in our morning ritual, brushing and braiding each other's hair in a circle that didn't include me. I had already come too far from them to return, and if I did, I would only drag them down. I felt sick.

They were safe and strong without me.

"Discovery," I said.

Olov Pilot flew me to Discovery. There was only one of him in the little scoot. "Does your pod know about Discovery?" I asked from the copilot seat.

"No," he said. "I'm the only one of us who ever takes anyone there. We are not a close pod; we all do things the others don't know about."

I knew some pods diverged later in life, but I hadn't talked to members of those pods. Now I was such a member. "Do you ever bring anyone back?"

"Not so far."

I watched Luxa below us as Olov piloted us above the stream of air traffic. Our buildings modular, angular, some with four sides, some with six, some with eight. None were tall yet. There was room for upward expansion when we needed it.

Luxa did not look large and sprawling, the way cities I had seen in vids of other planets did. It had lots of straight angles, many wider than ninety degrees, and soft colors. Paths branched around groups of buildings, creating blocks that were triangles, squares, trapezoids, hexagons, pentagons, dodecahedrons. All ground-level traffic used walkways and slidewalks; for cargo transport, we had subways and flyers.

Each building sat beside others that matched it in tone, though not in color. Color groups shifted as we flew toward the outer edges of the city. Blues to greens to yellows and paler ochres and beiges, rusted red, violet, and then to blues again, with broad belts of colorful trees or shrubs or flowerbeds lining slidewalks between structures.

The spaceport lay on the east edge of town, and took up almost as much room as the town, with different landing plots or strips for various kinds of orbit-to-planet-surface landers, and a ring of businesses that catered to spacefaring trade. There, the layout was different, less harmonious and less structured. We had been on a fieldtrip there when we were ten. It had disturbed us.

Aliens. Singletons. Discord.

Itsa had been intrigued by it. Shops sold many things we had never seen before and didn't understand, and the smells of food from the restaurants were strange, some nauseating, some enticing. Our teacher, Polya, led us and the other five pods in our class into one of the restaurants, and we claimed a large table. Human servers, not identical, brought us our food. Each pod ordered a different sort of noodle we couldn't get at the creche. I had liked the one we chose, and I had never tasted anything like it again.

Olov flew higher than I ever had. The scoot closed its vents to outside air, which had been cold before it shut us in. We headed for the mountains, which loomed to the west of Luxa. A river traced a silver vein from a low saddle in the mountains. It wound through forests of the purple and silver foliage of native Vive trees and the green and gold of introduced plants, widening as it reached the southern edge of Luxa.

This term, my pod would go on field trips to study mountain ecosystems, alien ruins, and the beach. Now I wouldn't go with them. But I would see Discovery.

The scoot cleared the tops of the mountains with room to spare. I looked down on snowcaps and thin vegetation, purple vines that snaked in thin nets over the snow, with lifted round leaves twisting and twirling.

The Backbone Mountains were only a triple line of peaks, and we flew over them in twenty minutes. Beyond the mountains' western feet stretched forest, with fewer introduced species, only small islands of green in the mostly purple and silver, with clearings here and there, shadowed indigo and lilac hollows with streams running through them, and a blue lake nearby. I didn't see anything that looked like a city.

Olov flew toward a clearing no different from other clearings. As we drew closer, I saw some small structures on the grass. A cleared spot grew larger as we lowered toward it. Olov dropped the scoot there.

From the ground, I could see two- and three-story buildings all around, the ones I had seen in the vid. Their roofs were gardens of exuberant native vegetation, leaves and vines showing along the eaves, embracing the buildings. A tracery of beaten earth foot trails led away from the landing pad.

"Low profile," Olov said. "Discovery keeps its secrets."

Two women, one tall, thin, and pale, the other short, broad, and dark, stood at the head of one of the paths and waited for the dust of the scoot's landing to settle. Olov opened the door and lowered the ramp, then picked up my bag and led the way. "Gracia, Odelle," he said.

"Olov. This must be Esta. Greetings and welcome, Esta."

I stepped off the bottom of the ramp onto beaten earth. Scents of unknown flowers and leaves, but none of the radiance of the city, the bounce of light and heat between the walls, or its pavement and stonework and chalky smell; the heat of the sun on my hair and shoulders, and a sudden rush of despair.

I sank to the ground, hunching over, my palms flattening against the dark, packed earth. Esta. Without my pod sibs, I was not Esta. Tears welled from my eyes and dripped to the dark ground, spotting it darker. The fire within that had always defined us was low and feeble. It didn't give me the sense of my own power now, when I needed it.

One of the women, the darker one, knelt beside me and put a hand on my shoulder. "Child," she said, her voice low and warm.

"I can't be Esta without my others," I said.

"I understand," she said. She stroked my shoulder gently, warmth and comfort. "I'm Odelle. Do you have another name?"

"Jixa," I said, the first time I had ever said it aloud. I wiped my eyes and straightened my spine. I touched Odelle's hand, then got to my feet. "Jixa," I repeated. All our life we had used our undertalk names only to know which of

ourselves we meant if there was any need to differentiate. Now my name would mean something new.

Me alone, me aloud. Who I was to other non-sib people.

Fire flared inside. Not the rage that made me burn things, the comforting warmth of safety.

Olov gave me my bag and went back inside the scoot for the other cargo he had brought.

“Jixa,” Odelle said. “Welcome to Discovery, Jixa.”

The End