

I was six years old when I shifted between worlds for the first time.

My mother and I were in our little apartment in the center of the world, the part that got built first. The world was new then and the nanites still busy about their work. The world has stretched much further now.

Our apartment was small but cozy, bathed in a vague light that spilled everywhere yet came from no particular source. Someone who had seen the first earth might have called it moonlight, or so we believed. None of us had seen earth for ourselves... certainly not me. Our artificial moonlight enshrined the city, slanting from every angle, drifting in a manufactured sky.

I sat at the table alone, drinking weak green tea from a chipped white teacup. Long wet hair fell around my shoulders, fresh from the bath, dampening my fuzzy robe.

I took a sip, set the teacup down, and looked at the table. A soft layer of green moss crept across it. As I watched, moss tendrils advanced toward me, trembling like slick fingers. The moss rustled as it grew, swallowing the legs of chairs.

The window had become a stained mosaic of asparagus and emerald. A small white butterfly frolicked around me, then landed on the rim of my cup.

I felt a glow of amber warmth, like the safety of cuddling into my mother's fragrant sheets, listening to her lullabies as I fell asleep.

But then I looked down. The ghostworms were poking their heads up, emerging implausibly through the concrete floor. Their slimy heads waved blindly as they wriggled and squirmed beneath the furniture.

I jumped up and knocked over my teacup, which bounced and clattered to the floor. A wash of pale green tea dribbled across my white robe. My mother rushed in.

Then the light changed, and everything resolved to normal. The table was spotless white. Suddenly, I became aware of how clean everything was: synthetic and flawless, wrapped in an artificial sheen.

"What happened, sweetheart?" my mother asked, picking up my teacup. The spill seeped into the floor and disappeared, swallowed by thirsty nanites.

"Nothing," I said, remembering the way the butterfly had landed curiously on my cup. "Can I sleep in your bed tonight?"

"Hmm," she said, which meant yes.

In my mother's bedroom, lace curtains covered the small window, shuttered to keep out the light. A flame flickered in the lamp on the desk. Her sheets were soft and smelled like lavender.

Usually she sang to me, but that night, I made her tell me the story. I knew it already, but I loved hearing it again and again. "Tell me about how it was, when you found Celadon, before I was born."

My mother loved to tell this story almost as much as I loved to hear it. Even if there were parts she skipped over. "Well," she said. She tucked a long strand of white hair behind her ears, her green eyes glistening with memories of far away days. "I was exploring with my crew on our ship, a beautiful ship. Her name was Alanis. She's retired now, but you should have seen her. Maybe

someday we can go down to the docks and visit. She was so slick, so smart, so... gentle. You know about our home-world: it was a lovely place to live, but it was too full. It was called Tenne. So, even though we loved Tenne, we knew we'd need another world soon where we could have our children—" at this point in the story she always touched my nose—"and they could have their children. We spent years with our ship, exploring the darkness, looking for a good spot to grow another world. A planet we could make our own."

I could hardly imagine the years-long journey in that smart, gentle ship. I was only six years old, after all. Back then, I didn't understand how old my mother really was. I'm not sure if I even understand it now. "And finally you found the planet," I said.

"Yeah," she said. She looked over my head, as if she was looking out the window, though it was closed. "We descended closer and closer, and the surface of the planet was this beautiful green. So we called it Celadon. We sent the bots down to do readings, investigate the surface, see if it was safe. We had to wait for a while, but I already knew. I felt it, somehow, you know? We were home. By that time, I was already expecting you."

"And I was the very first baby born on Celadon," I interjected self-importantly.

"Yes," she said. "Yes, you were. But before that, we sent the nanites down to the surface of the planet, and they began building a new world for us, just like the cities we'd left behind on Tenne."

It was a lovely story, the beginning of a myth. And my mother was the heroine.

It was a lovely story, but it wasn't entirely true.

But no one knew that at first, except the original crew of the spaceship from Tenne. And they didn't have anything to say about it. Waves of new settlers came in every year or so, and they all viewed my mother as a heroine, too. I remember the ceremony they staged, honoring her with a medal on the steps of the newly constructed city hall. Her white hair was just as luminescent as the marble steps. They hung a glistening silver medal around her neck. She was brave and beautiful, a conqueror and a pioneer.

But when I was twelve, the anthropologists finally arrived. They were angry.

Not all of them were human. They were a motley group, a strange menagerie of feathers and wings and awkward tusks and shining cyborg limbs. This was not good. Celadon was a human planet, discovered and populated by ancient earth-stock. The others tended to be a bit resentful. They thought the humans had too many planets already.

They met in the city hall, the same one where my mother had been honored years ago. I sat in the last row of chairs, my pale hair falling in my eyes. I listened as my mother explained her case to the strange and unsympathetic panel of judges. And for the first time, I heard the whole story.

There had been life on this planet: a natural ecosystem. An endless network of worms crawled just beneath the surface. Enormous flocks of butterflies lived in the trees, roaming the oceans of moss. When they landed en masse, they could shroud a tree in shimmering snow.

The scouting bots' findings corroborated those of the few anthropologists who'd landed on this planet some years earlier. Without further intensive

study--by the anthropologists, of course--it was impossible to rule out the potential that the worms and butterflies had been sentient life forms.

They no longer existed on Celadon. They had been destroyed. My mother had given the order.

Two years before the ship had arrived at the planet that would become Celadon, the travelers received the news from Tenne. Among the news, there was the gruesome story of a ship that left just before Alanis. This ship had discovered a new planet, odd but livable. There was only one possibly-sentient life form: a species of small reptiles, lizard-like creatures that traveled in swarms and packs. The settlers had already been on the ship for years, and they were determined to co-exist peacefully, while the anthropologists studied the reptiles. Somehow, the reptiles infiltrated the colony. They massacred the settlers, leaving nothing but regurgitated bones and walls smeared with blood. The nanites were already tidying the remains when the next wave of settlers arrived.

"So I did what I thought was right," my mother said, facing the panel without flinching. "I wanted this planet to be safe."

At her order, nanites swarmed the planet, pulsing the surface with brutal light. The worms and butterflies and moss that coated the surface were destroyed. The planet was scrubbed clean.

The hearings were long, the panelists long-winded. They called expert witnesses, and the settlers on the first ship called their own.

Sometime during this long proceeding, the shift happened again. I watched with interest as the windows darkened with moss and the floor disintegrated into a mass of ghostworms. I was still surrounded by people, but no panelists. Things were strangely silent in this world. No one felt the need to speak.

A man sat just ahead of me, listening intently to nothing in particular. As I watched, a ghostworm wriggled out of his left ear, explored the back of his neck with a probing tip, then slid into the right ear.

I felt the amber glow again, the numbing warmth. The bench I sat on disintegrated, then the wall beside me--whole patches consumed by a black rot, eaten wafer-thin. The moss consumed windows, and white butterflies wandered in through broken panes.

The man with worms in his ears turned around, glanced at me, and nodded kindly.

Meanwhile, in the real world, the panel was sentencing my mother for the crime of xenocide. Her sentence: life imprisonment, in a penal colony on a rock far from this world.

In a different time, there would have been riots. Blood would have run in the streets. But these people had waited too long to make this planet their home. They'd lived too long, strayed too far, sacrificed too much. They accepted her fate with penitent guilt, willing to sacrifice my mother to clear their collective conscience.

I was the only one who screamed and protested. They took her away, still calm and resolute, her hair brilliantly white around her shoulders, her eyes enigmatic emerald.

They sent me to live with a man I called "uncle"--one of the original settlers,

my mother's shipmate.

The years after that were dark and ill-defined. My city that had once seemed so clean and bright felt sterile and empty. The people who I'd imagined family were strangers and betrayers.

This was when the two worlds began to diverge, no longer twinned as they once had been.

In the second world, we still lived in the old apartment. My mother was there, and we were together. Moss coated the chairs and crept across the table, blossoming thick in unexpected places like cups and plates. There were ghostworms underfoot, but they anticipated our footsteps, trailing our ankles like devoted pets. The butterflies flocked around our heads. In the second world, we rarely spoke; it no longer seemed necessary.

We followed our normal routines, setting out small meals, singing in the evenings, reading old books from my mother's library. We toured the city and the light was golden. Beneath everything shuddered a tremendous thrill: warmly it beckoned, to come ever closer, to come further in.

A snow-white butterfly landed on my fingertip, and revulsion stung through me. I pulled away, feeling sick. My mother smiled, but there was a gulf between us; she didn't understand. Butterflies wreathed her hair like garlands and the moss shifted beneath her feet, cushioning her steps. Whole sections of the city were green with its weight. Passersby wore green fingernails and heads full of worms. My mother inhabited this world, and she was content.

In this world, it was difficult for me to remember any other—my own world felt like a pallid dream. I tried to tell her, but when I opened my mouth, her world faded away.

Two decades passed. I got my own apartment. I wrote my mother letters, though they took years to reach her.

When I wrote, I felt like I was dropping my letters into an endless chasm where they would never be found.

I wrote:

Sometimes I'm in a different world. The world that would have been if we hadn't killed the butterflies. It's a green world, full of moss... earthworms that eat through the floors... butterflies that gather around heads. Walls disintegrating with black rot. It wants something. The life that was here isn't content to live and let live. It wants us, too. In that world, everything is connected. Everyone is part of it, and it wants to swallow us.

She wrote back, finally, eventually.

Love, don't think about what could have been, don't think about the past. I'm fine here. I've lived a long time, much longer than you, you know. You should find a ship, explore, see the galaxy. You'll make different choices, better ones.

She thought it was an allegory. I wrote back.

It's not a metaphor, mother. I have seen that world. Literally. I see it all the time. And I have been seeing it more and more.

Years passed, again. Finally, another letter.

Stranger things have happened. Go see Ravin. He can explain it better than I can.

Ravin had been my mother's closest friend aboard the ship. Maybe her lover, maybe even my father. I didn't know if I had one.

One image of Ravin burned white-hot for me: the way he sat silently in the back of the room as my mother was sentenced. His eyes were downcast, his cheeks pale, his lips pressed together. He'd done nothing, and I was still angry. If he was my father, I didn't want him.

But I did want answers to my questions, and it would be years before I could get another letter from my mother. So I went to find him.

His room on the other side of the city was small but comfortable. Light sparkled in the windows, glinting off the shells of blue glass bottles. Art from Tenne graced the walls. His furniture was handmade, not built by nanites.

"Sit," he said, gesturing to a small sofa. I did. I was surprised by how thin and small he seemed, even standing above me.

He'd been playing an old game from Tenne. The board was chaotic with black and white pebbles. Each pebble was black on one side, white on the other. Flipping only one could transform the board. It was a complicated game, and I didn't know how to play.

We cut through the pleasantries quickly. "My mother told me to come. She said you could explain."

"Go on," he said, his eyes penetrating blue.

"I'm in the middle of two worlds," I said. "This world that we're in right now, and another one. I don't know where it is, exactly. I tend to think it's the world that would have been if—You know. If they hadn't killed the natural life here." I said "they," though I could have said "you."

"What do you mean, you're in the middle?"

"I see both. I see this one more. But the other one, I see it too."

"What does it look like?" His interest felt cool and scientific.

I described my second world.

He thought for a while, then told me the story I already knew so well. "You know, your mother was pregnant with you when we discovered Celadon. Everyone told her she was being silly, that she had enough to worry about as captain of a pioneering ship. No one could make her change her mind. She wanted to have you, the natural way."

He gazed at me and paused, as if expecting me to say something. Silence thickened between us, and he continued.

"I still remember the way she looked, standing there on the deck. The trees crowding the edges of the window. The leaves rustling from the air in the vents. There was a red bird perched above her, and its color matched her dress. She stared out the window and all of a sudden, there was Celadon. The closer we got, the greener it became. We stayed like that until it was safe to land."

"So what are you saying?"

"I don't know, exactly. You were there from the beginning, your fate intertwined with Celadon's. You're part of this world in a way that no one else is." He was quiet for a moment. "In the second world, would you say that time works differently?"

"Yes," I said. "I didn't notice it for a while, because everything feels so brief and fragmented already. But it does. Causality seems to be missing, somehow. Things happen for no reason."

He began pacing the room. He flipped a black pebble over to reveal its white underbelly, then contemplated the ripple of results that followed. "We thought we were doing the right thing. Now I'm not so sure. There was something special here, something we should have investigated."

"You did the right thing," I said resolutely. "That world... well, there's just something wrong about it." "Different, maybe," he suggested. "Special."

"Does it matter?"

"No, not really," he said. "It's gone, we'll live with the consequences."

"Some of us more than others," I said pointedly.

He looked away and cleared his throat. "It's gone, except it's not gone for you. I can't really explain what happened, or why. We made a decision, with results that changed history. And there you are, at the cusp. Caught in the middle between both paths."

There was one more thing I wanted to get clear. "So, you all decided together. You all decided to give the order to scrub the ecosystem."

"We all voted, yes. Only one person voted against."

"And who was that?" I demanded.

"Me."

For a moment, I had no words. "Why did you vote against?"

He spent a minute searching for words. "I was responsible for monitoring the bots' info-loads as they explored the planet. And I had read some of the anthropologists' texts on the surface life. I had a sense--and I wasn't the only one--that there was something at work here, something truly alive."

"But no one else on the ship felt that way," I said.

"No," he said. "Everyone else wanted to break land and start construction. They told me I had always been too mystical for my own good. Maybe it's true. Your mother was very angry at me. It was part of why we parted ways once we landed here." He fixed me with his steely blue eyes, and for a moment I knew, but I pushed the knowledge away.

I felt exhausted. "I have to go now," I said.

"Come again," he invited me, showing me to the door. "

"I will," I said. I knew I would not.

Instead, I visited the ship, Alanis.

She was retired, and lived in a special place, down at the docks. She was the most important ship on Celadon, after all. Every week, technicians came in and lovingly checked her ports, inspected her chips. The dock-boys polished her hull and shined her floors. Children left flowers beneath her. Sometimes, her keepers gave tours, which she didn't enjoy very much. She did enjoy my visits, though. But they've been rare, mostly alongside my mother.

This time, I went alone, and with a mission.

"Alanis," I said, standing on her main deck, watching the dark lights that I liked to think of as her eyes.

"Yes," she answered.

"I need help. For my mother. I need logs, recordings. I need to know all the details about the weeks before they landed on Celadon. I want to know how the decisions were made. Do you have that? Do you still have the logs?"

"Of course," she said, sounding amused. "I haven't forgotten." I couldn't tell if she was teasing me or not.

"Can I have them?"

"Of course."

She painted a disk for me and gave it to me with a cup of hot chocolate.

"Thank you," I said.

She couldn't make real hot chocolate anymore; her domestics were corrupted and her keepers had stopped replenishing the stores a long time ago. I didn't tell her that, just took the disk and the cup with me as I left. Why did everyone but me seem so old?

I walked through the city, clutching my disk and looking for somewhere to discard the mug of chocolate sludge.

The city alone was young, the same age as me.

You could tell. Maybe it was the effect of construction by nanites, but everything seemed youthful and energetic. The streets glowed. The stoplights inspected the traffic beneath. Houses vibrated, ever so slightly, like a picture with weak transmission.

I'd noticed that Ravin's furniture seemed solid and inert. Because it was old, or because it was built by hand?

The more I thought about it, the more his home seemed like its own kind of prison.

After visiting Alanis, I was ready. This was what I'd been waiting to do for years, and I was finally old enough. By the time the journey ended, I was even older.

I traveled to Tenne, to go before the panel. It wasn't the same panel of anthropologists who'd sentenced my mother, although I recognized a few familiar faces—if they could be called faces. I doubt they recognized me. It had been thirty-some years, and I was no longer the same pale and awkward

girl. Slowly, falteringly, I grew into my mother's strength.

The anthropologists were clipped and impatient, glaring at me over snouts and beaks and masks. I'd traveled light-years to get here—they would have to be patient.

"I am here to speak on behalf of my mother," I said.

"State her name for the record, please."

It was a long name: new syllables garnered for every century, every experience that had marked her.

"Go on," the moderator intoned. She was a cyborg, with long synthetic limbs, metallic purple hair, and a sleek silicone shine to her skin. I couldn't interpret her inflection, nor her expression. It was a specific kind of loneliness that I'd learned to live with.

"My mother was unfairly sentenced for the crime of many. She gave the order, yes. But the whole group voted." I produced my logs from the ship. They showed my mother giving the final order; they also showed unanimous agreement.

I presented the panel with everything I had. "She should not bear the weight of this decision alone. It was a group decision. Everyone who lives on Celadon should share the responsibility, together."

The panel was brisk and disinterested. "I'm sorry," the cyborg said, "but we rarely reverse the decision of a previous court, except in notable extenuating circumstances. All this information was available at the time of the previous hearing."

"Yes. But my mother didn't bring it up. Because she wasn't like that. She was the only one who was willing to take responsibility for the actions."

"Then the responsibility clearly rests with her," the cyborg said, and I couldn't tell if she was being unkind or not. "If you'd like to appeal this to a higher court, you are within your rights as a galactic citizen to go before the High Court of Cultural Differences."

"But that's on the other side of the galaxy." It would take me longer to reach the High Court than all the years I'd been alive so far.

"Precisely," she said crisply. "Your mother has already lived for centuries. If you want to give your first years for her last, then go ahead. The next ship leaves for the High Court in a few months."

I pleaded as long as they'd allow, but their decision was final. At some level, I'd expected it all along. Only longing had made me hope for the unforeseen. After all, communication from world to world had always been hazy, and rules changed faster than space travel. I'd hoped there was a chance.

I declined their offer of transportation to the High Court. "I'll find my own ship."

I'd already decided: if I was going to the High Court, then Ravin was going with me. He would not have been my first choice of companions, but I felt he had a responsibility. I wasn't ready to make my way into the galaxy alone. And my mother had chosen him first.

Besides, what was a couple years of preparation for a fifty-year journey?



I found passage to Celadon.

Now, in transit between Tenne and Celadon, I've spent my spare hours writing this account. I've reviewed what has passed. I'm prepared for what is to come.

When I arrive on Celadon, there is a letter.

My mother has died. Peacefully, in her sleep. Perhaps she was already gone, even as I pled her case before the panel. It's so hard to calculate time.

She's been absent from my world for so long, yet death makes me feel her absence more sharply. Even worlds away, she was the force that kept my world revolving.

Heartbroken, I wander aimlessly through the city. I wish I could go to Ravin, but I can't. Too much has come between us. He will never be family.

The city feels changed, too. The change is indefinable. But the lights glare brighter; the noises are louder, more unnatural.

I sit in my apartment. I drink fragrant green tea and wait, letting my eyes drift half-closed as I watch the silver play of light in lace curtains.

Until the curtains crumble black and turn to dust, the walls are streaked with moist darkness, and the moss squelches beneath my bare feet.

I want to find my mother, but time works differently here; seeking does not always lead to finding. Instead, I wander, patient as a dream. Whole sections of the city have been reclaimed by the moss. There are few people. I glimpse them in dark corners, pale like worms, locked in tangles of arms and legs. I long to join them, but I keep walking.

Butterflies land in droves on my shoulders, sprinkling me with the sugar that dulls the sting.

In this world, all life is the same. At first, I believed there were only three life-forms here. Now I understand there is only one. The worms, the moss, the butterflies... all are merely manifestations of its being: spanning this world from the ground to the sky, seeing all, knowing all, devouring all.

I find my mother at the edge of a dripping forest. She sits with her back against a sturdy tree, her white hair intertwined with its roots. Her emerald-green eyes consider me, comfortably. She smiles in welcome. She opens her mouth to speak, but all that emerges is a small white butterfly, which alights gracefully on my shoulder.

I fight the urge to sleep, and struggle to speak.

"Mother," I stammer, my tongue sticky-dry. "Mother. Are you happy here?"

Her lips don't move, but I feel her voice, echoing through me. "Of course. Always."

I lie beside her, and the tree's roots shift to accommodate me. The moss drifts over my face and blinds my eyes. The butterflies weave patterns in my hair. The ghostworms caress my fingers. Finally, I understand.

This is life, eternal, everlasting. It is not good, it is not evil. It simply

is. It desires to be always more. And I too desire, to be part of everything, to feel it all.

"You're here," the moss whispers into my ears as it penetrates, and it greets me with a vision: the moment on which all else depends. A moment which changes history; yet there are many histories on Celadon, and enough consciousness to hold them all.

I am a woman, strong and eager, standing on the foremost deck of a smart and gentle ship. The fans blow breezes through my hair. The leaves of trees rustle above me. Inside me, a heart beats, beautiful and unfaltering. I stroke my stomach, the swelling expanse that waits beneath my crimson dress. I stand before a window; below stretches a green and glowing planet. I've already named it, but nobody knows yet. Celadon. This pulsating green world and the heartbeat inside me have become the two lovers I live for.

Resolute, I turn from the window, summing up the energy to create and destroy worlds. I speak, one word:

"Now."