

LITTLE MICE

Two – After

When I was eight, I decided to make a surprise birthday breakfast for Father. I was chopping up exotic fruits and arranging them on a platter, but as the sharp knife sliced into a mango, it took off the tip of my finger. I remember the bright blood pooling onto the yellow flesh of the fruit. Time seemed suspended, shock initially blocking out the pain.

I feel like that now, like time has paused. I know the pain will come and it will be a thousand times worse than the pain of my finger. Back then, I wasn't even scared. Father appeared when he heard me calling, scooped me up in his strong arms and rushed me to the Canopy Hospital. There isn't even a scar. But there will be no fixing this pain.

Father is dead. I try gripping this new reality, but it is too slippery to catch. *They're wrong.* I decide. They must be wrong.

Father is dead? I don't believe it. I glance down the hallway, half expecting to see him striding towards us, declaring it all a mistake. Father cannot be dead. It is impossible, inconceivable.

Crying sounds pierce my ears. I look at Lucile. *Don't cry, I want to snap. I don't believe it, nor should you.* Someone touches my shoulder, but I jerk away.

Time passes. Somehow, we are inside the apartment. I am seated in an armchair, though I do not recall sitting down. One of the Enforcers kneels beside me. His lips move, but the words float away in the air unheard. Dazed, I glance around. Dante holds Lucile as she sobs against his shoulder. I don't think I've ever seen her weep before. It is like watching a play. She shudders and gasps with pantomime extravagance, while I remain perfectly still.

Father is dead. The phrase curls itself inside my mind, blocking out everything else. I know Father wasn't perfect. He worked long hours, so he was seldom around. And when he

was home, he was strict and demanding. In truth I was sometimes afraid of him. But then, there were those rare, special days when he'd make time for me, and it felt like rain falling on parched earth. I drank in each drop of attention.