

**Planet Other**  
by Cassidy Creer



**Artist Statement**

*I want to create fictional literature that reaches out to audiences who haven't been historically included in most genres of literature. Throughout my educational career, specifically in literature courses, I have become accustomed to the sigh-inducing plethora of male authors on each syllabus. Then, I took my first speculative fiction class at UCSB and finally found what I had been yearning for throughout my high school and college years. Speculative fiction is a genre of literature that often encompasses science fiction, fantasy, and horror. It is a genre that focuses on social issues and uses world building as a tool to create "other" worlds different from our own.<sup>109</sup> In my work, I create the sister-planet to Earth, Planet Loryn. It exists in an alternate dimension called the Equat Dimension. The protagonist in my story, Kyra, serves as a representation of the "other" identity in the "other" world that is often portrayed in works of speculative fiction. Throughout my short story, I touch on the social themes of gender inequality, eugenics, and living with a disability within an intolerant population. For my short story, my*

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<sup>109</sup>Gill, R. B. 2013. The uses of genre and the classification of speculative fiction. *Mosaic : a Journal for the Interdisciplinary Study of Literature* 46, (2) (06): 71-85, <https://www.proquest.com/scholarly-journals/uses-genre-classification-speculative-fiction/docview/1366018308/se-2> (accessed June 9, 2023).

research included analyzing peer-reviewed critical analyses of speculative fiction as a genre and multiple speculative fiction short stories and novels. Although speculative fiction has been talked about since the 1940s, its defining boundaries as a genre are still being explored today. However, there seems to be an overall consensus of the overarching purpose of speculative fiction. This purpose is to explore social issues in an environment that is different from Earth as it exists today.<sup>110</sup> Through analyzing protagonists such as Nalo Hopkinson's *Tan-Tan* and N.K. Jemisin's *Essun*, I was able to build on this idea of the "other" identity.<sup>111</sup> My creative research allowed me to define the "other" identity as any identity that is different from an able bodied, deemed physically fit, heterosexual, white cis-male; basically any person who has not experienced the everyday life of the identity that our society has historically catered to in every way.

In my work, I followed the methodologies that are frequent in the speculative fiction genre. This included creating a protagonist that doesn't fit the "norm" of American society, a world that is completely different from Earth, and a society that represents social issues. My story illustrates the potential dangers of gender inequality and the effects it can have on a growing society, even fantastical societies. I want my work to reach out and resonate with people that have been historically marginalized within the literary sphere. I want my readers to digest the social commentary. I want them to feel represented. I want them to feel seen.

### **Planet Other**

Our ancestors embody our failure and our success. Our ancestors overcome our mistakes, so that we do not repeat the same insidious cycles. Kyra's ancestors learned from your ancestors. Their ancestors watched and observed your Planet Earth up until its last breath as a body.

Kyra's home is different from your home. Your home was filled with more land, more people, and more conflict (and more *freedom*). Your home is dead, a distant memory to Kyra's species. They have been avoiding the misjudgments that killed your planet 3000 years ago. Kyra's ancestors eradicated the mistakes of your past. They have survived. They are survivors. Their home is Planet Loryn, the sister planet to Earth, only it exists in the Equat Dimension.

Planet Loryn is relatively small compared to Earth, measuring around half of Earth's size. The planet has one strip of land that measures 100 miles wide traveling vertically around the circumference of its sphere. The body of land inhabits an array of plant and animal diversity. Its soil is dark and rich, ready to embody its role in the cycle of life. Its soil is covered in a thin layer of deep green moss, impenetrable to species that lack the correct skeletal apparatus. You humans would be fine. You could sink your toes deep into the wet, cold soil, creating a temporary anchor with each step. The land figure perfectly dissects the two existing bodies of water on our planet:

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<sup>110</sup>Calvo-Quirós, William A. 2016. "The Emancipatory Power of the Imaginary." *Aztlan: Journal of Chicano Studies* 41 (1): 155–70.

<https://search-ebscohost-com.proxy.library.ucsb.edu/login.aspx?direct=true&db=a9h&AN=113876455&site=ehost-live>.

<sup>111</sup>Hopkinson, Nalo. 2000. *Midnight Robber*. New York: Warner Books.  
Jemisin, N. K. (2016). *The fifth season*. Orbit.

Freshwater and Saltwater. On the Western side of the land strip, there is Freshwater inhabiting the “male” sex of the planet’s apex species. On the Eastern side of the land strip, there is Saltwater inhabiting the “female” sex of the planet’s apex species. I use these sex labels merely to ground you, make you more comfortable, to situate you in Earthly familiarity, so you won't get too lost and confused.

Sorry, was that patronizing?

Then again, you are from Earth, so I think I can safely assume you already possess that condescending skill, readily available sitting in your human survival toolkit. I know I sound bitter. I can’t help it. I was there the day that Earth finally possessed the technological and scientific instruments to communicate with our species. I was there the day we found out that Earth was dead. That day changed everything. You changed everything. And for that, I will never forgive you.

### **PRESENT DAY: YEAR 6889 AED (AFTER EARTH’S DEATH)**

Kyra glances at their reflection in the abalone mirror. The abalone mirror is their favorite. It’s hard not to like your appearance when it's mirroring back at you in shades of metallic purple and blue. As if their own reflection traveled through rainbows just to make it back to them. The abalone mirror stood about six feet tall in Kyra’s assigned bedroom. They couldn’t help but glance towards the bottom of the mirror, a habit they’re constantly trying to break. But, there it was, as if all of Kyra’s shame could be stored in one body part.

Everything else was *normal*.

Their long, dark brown hair was braided into five identical strands that rested on their broad shoulders; *normal*. Their gills flared open and shut flowing on the left and right side of their neck; *normal*. Their dark gray body shimmers as they sashay in the remnants of the shellfish. The word *normal* is starting to sound anything but normal the more Kyra thinks about it. They continue inspecting their body. Their arms are long and strong, complementing the size of their legs. They trail one of their webbed fingers down the center of their breasts, down to their belly button. They turn slightly, angling themselves so they could see the length of their dorsal fin extend from the center of their shoulders to the base of their tailbone. Kyra elevates herself slightly to watch as their legs dangle lightly. Their legs are long and thin, with two dorsal fins extending from the back of their knee down to the base of their feet. Their feet. They look away. But, it’s the same feeling you experience in your human world when you kill an insect. You don’t want to look at what’s under your newly tarnished shoe, or now unusable paper towel; but you have to. Your curiosity of whether that fly or spider is actually dead will win nine times out of ten. So, Kyra opens their eyes and forces themselves to look. Yup, it’s still there. Like it always is.

“You are the bane of my existence,” they sigh as they examine their left foot.

“Kyra are you up? Please come down and eat some fish before I have to head off to the Deciding,” Elder Locat calls from the eating area.

The Deciding. Great. Krya glances in the mirror one last time, before gracefully gliding through the hole located in their bright orange coral reef wall. They zoom past the holes distinguishing their fellow groupings and make their way to the eating area.

“I know this is a hard time for you, with the Deciding and all of your fellow Salty Groupplings running around excited. But, you’re in this reef for a reason, Kyra. You need to bond with these Salties,” Elder Locat says with genuine concern .

Elder Locat and Kyra suddenly glance at Kyra’s left foot.

“Why do I have to bond with the Salties? They teach us in Lessons that the Breeding Center separates the Salties from the Freshies because they will die if they are put into the wrong body of water. But, maybe I was supposed to be with the Freshies and someone accidentally put me in the Salt body and that’s why my foot is different from everyone else,” Kyra whines at Elder Locat.

Elder Locat looks away from Kyra, refusing to meet their gaze, “I don’t know, Kyra. I’m pretty sure the Breeding Center has a perfect system. They don’t make mistakes. I’ve been to the Breeding Center. I’ve been the decided at The Deciding. It’s impossible for you to know this, but you should be happy you’re not allowed to be considered.”

Kyra wants to pry for more details, but they know better than to push Elder Locat. Instead, Kyra decides to clear their mind and heads out of the colossal coral reef home. Kyra places their ankles together and moves their body in the motion of the human dance move: the worm. Their dorsal fins glimmer from the white sand reflecting off the ocean floor. Kyra starts to approach their destination. This safe space is dark, almost so dark it has no visibility. If it wasn’t for the translucent, almost sparkling, silver-blue lights emitting from the ocean floor, everything around Kyra would be pitch black. But, these slivers of light emit beautiful visibility all around them. Kyra can see their favorite perching rock sparkle as the light rays reflect off its white surface. They can see the different shades of green in the seagrass splayed out in random patches. The light rays stop at a ridge 300 feet above Kyra’s safe rock. The rays create a one-way see-through effect, where Kyra can see everything above the separating ridge, but no one can see below without penetrating the seemingly invisible layer. Groupplings aren’t supposed to swim off on their own. Groupplings are not supposed to go this far outside of the communal areas without permission or guidance of an elder.

But, Kyra isn’t bound to *normal* grouppling regulations.

They are viewed with pity and an unspoken knowledge that they are not a part of the *normal* grouppling social scene. At one time, this distinction between Kyra (*other*) and the groupplings (*normal*) hurt Kyra to their core, but now they see it as an opening to *freedom*.

## THE DECIDING

“Groupplings and Elders please calm down, and please no more intermingling,” the presenting Elder says while giving their audience a chastising glare. “This year we will require more groupplings than ever before,” the announcer continues while the crowd erupts in hushed, excited murmurs.

Kyra doesn’t know why they are even there. They don’t even get to be evaluated, so why are they required to even show up? Kyra feels a webbed hand stroke their shoulder with comfort. They didn’t need to turn around to know that Elder Locat was the owner of this warm gesture.

“Let’s begin!” plays out while various ocean creatures assemble themselves preparing to sing their assigned parts.

Kyra looks around. At first glance, this all looks seemingly innocent. The various Salt creatures line up to perform. The pufferfish emits a deep baritone tune. When Kyra watches them closely enough, they can see the fish unhinge its jaw in preparation for the inhalation. The once small body turns into a giant, light brown ball with sharp spikes threatening anything that surrounds it. Once the puffer fish blow themselves up with water, they let out a long, loud exhalation of deep and low tones that almost make the pink coral reef vibrate under Kyra’s feet.

Their *feet*.

They are hyper aware of the absence of vibration in between their toes on their left foot. Then, Kyra turns to the eels. The eels expel high tenors that visibly start at their tail, traveling quickly like a ball of air rushing through their long, narrow bodies. The balls of air accentuate the bright teal lines that separate the brown spots surrounding the eel’s body. Kyra whips their head around to look at the most remarkable of them all, the lionfish. Their orange-brown and white stripes quiver with each soprano note they release. The power each note holds should cause some sort of jarring movement, but the lionfish holds steady in their allotted placement. Kyra watches as a picture of each Grouping between the ages of 50 and 60 human years is displayed on a black and smooth vertical rock. Kyra’s species usually live to 200 human years, but what they don’t know is this number has been decreasing dramatically over the last century.

**Petrise Commune - 30 wave-years**

**Appearance: 8/10 Cobalts**

**Health: 9/10 Cobalts**

**Intelligence: 7/10 Cobalts**

**Overall Score: 24/30 Cobalts**

The vibrating crowd watches as each Grouping receives their judgment. As Kyra watches, their entire body tenses in anticipation. Kyra knows their name is not going to appear on the luminescent rock screen. But, maybe if they look hard enough, with enough will, their name will shock the entire crowd with a perfect score!

It doesn’t.

It never will. Petrise is worth 24 Cobalts, and Cobalts are the most valuable compound found in Kyra’s ocean home. Kyra is worth none *socially*. Unwilling to further their humiliation, Kyra hops up pressing their ankles together. They zoom through the coral structures of their secretly depleting commune. They feel the tiny swoosh of water that separates them from the edge of every surface they pass in their retreat. Finally, Kyra lands on the shiny white rock that marks their safety. They start to taste the familiar flavor of their tears against the stark taste of the Salt Water. The taste is hard to explain. The tears are salty, but not like the ocean water. Kyra can taste that the tears are a part of them. The tears are special to Kyra and only Kyra. As they close their eyes and lay their head on their slippery knee, they see something -

**FLASH!**

“Hello?” Kyra asks in a shaky, but strong voice.

Nothing. No creatures seem to be lurking around them. Whatever. Kyra returns to their isolated pity party -

**FLASH!**

Kyra cautiously swims behind a rock next to their perch, peeking over to where the flashing seems to be coming from. They stare at the translucent, bright gray rays of light...waiting. Nothing happens. Just as Kyra is about to swim back to their safe spot -

**FLASH!**

“Hello? Who’s there?” Kyra asks in a weaker voice.

When no one replies, Kyra swims closer and deeper, investigating the unknown. They’ve never gone this close to the light rays before...they’ve never had a reason to. Kyra swims down to the base of these tunnels of light. The closer they look at the base, the more confused they get. The base is bright, brighter than anything they’ve ever seen. The more Kyra looks at the brightness, the more darkness creeps into their vision as they look away. Kyra can see these structures aren’t really tunnels at all. Each individual eruption of light seems to be illuminating from five distinct points. There’s a point at the top of the emission, below it lies two points directly across from each other, and then two more points below that.

It’s beautiful.

**FLASH! FLASH! FLASH!**

Different individual tunnels of light flash at different times. Kyra giggles at the strange, radiant show. They had no idea the rays of light that have comforted them for so long, came from so many individual origins. They look like they are in clusters. One cluster has three light bases that form a diagonal line. Another group has seven bases, the bottom four bases almost create a perfect square while the remaining three look like a handle of some sort. One of the bases in the square flickers.

**FLASH!**

Then one on the top of the handle -

**FLASH!**

Kyra lets out a surprised laugh. They swim over to the top of the handle structure and wave their hand over the tunnel of silver light.

“Woah!” Kyra exclaims as a rush of electricity rushes through their arm, then their torso, legs, and feet - “Ow!”

Kyra looks at their left foot and winces. They shake their foot as the sting lingers and then dissipates.

**FLASH!**

But, this time the flash comes from beyond the area that Kyra is exploring. They timidly swim towards the new flash until the only thing separating Kyra and the area of the new flash is a small patch of seagrass that barely extends above Kyra’s head. Kyra takes a deep breath and cautiously moves into the grass.

**FLASH!**

This time, Kyra feels the flash in their body, feeling the same electric sensation they felt when they touch the tunnels of light. Except when they feel this flash, they are snapped back into a memory, a memory of their ancestors.

### **1500 AED (AFTER EARTH'S DEATH)**

“I don’t understand why the Elders are doing this,” groupling Hylie says with tears in their eyes.

“They said it’s better for all of us if we separate. They said if we don’t, we are killing our planet,” Bruin says while mirroring Hylie’s tears.

“How will I talk to you? Who’s going to tell me when my braids are out of place or stuck to my fins? I guess you don’t need me for that since you don’t have any braids or anything” Hylie says, suddenly aware of the physical differences between Bruin and herself.

Where Hylie has five identically long braids, Bruin has short scruff surrounding their head. Where Hylie has two symmetrical breasts, Bruin has none. And, finally, where Hylie has a small opening at the center point between their hips, Bruin has an almost fin-like structure ready to fertilize.. But, that was then.

*Before.*

Back then, Bruin had the freedom to choose their mate, whether the mate looked more like Bruin or more like Hylie. These are minute differences in appearance. There are actually more physical variations amongst Hylie and their fellow breasted grouplings than Hylie and Bruin. But, what’s really striking is that both grouplings have no fins on the back of their feet and no webbed toes. Even without the weebing, their toes are still long enough so when they put their feet together to swim it still creates a powerful swimming machine.

“I can’t just not see you. You’re my best friend. I don’t even know what a Breeding Center is, Bruin,” Hylie whispers, starting to cry again.

“Not here. It’s not safe with all of the Elder patrol. Let’s go to the lights. I’ll go to the Fresh lights and you go to the Salt lights. Use the stone word maps so we can talk safely,” Bruin replies as the two Grouplings separate.

As Bruin swims towards the land strip, Hylie follows a familiar path. Passing through different bright orange and pink coral formations. They reach the dark rock ledge and dive down towards the large white rock surrounded by seagrass. When they finally arrive at the formation of light, they stand silently as they take it in. Then, Hylie swims across the seagrass to a large bed of light clusters. Hylie and Bruin have created flash codes on various stone surfaces next to each cluster. Hylie swims over to the cluster they call *Taurus*. The stone next to this collection of light tunnels signals:

**Top Point One FLASH: Hi, are you stable?**

**Top Point Two FLASHES: Do you want to sneak away and hunt for food?**

**Top Point Three FLASHES: I need to go to sleep**

Hylie extends their arm through the top point of the center light tunnel within the cluster once every two human minutes, waiting for Bruin's reply.

**FLASH! FLASH!**

Hylie sees the flashes coming from the bottom light tunnel of the cluster.

"When do you leave for the Breeding Center," Bruin flashes.

"Tomorrow morning. The Elders are saying it's an honor to be chosen. But, why are they doing this? Separating us based on the mere absence or presence of a fertilizing fin? That's separating half of our community, Bruin. What's going to happen to our community? We are connected to each other. We need each other," Hylie moves breathlessly as they zig zag through light clusters.

"I passed by Bhas and Zelle crying in each other's arms. The taste of their tears told me it was them before I even saw them. They told me the Elder patrol is forcing them to say their goodbyes before they are permanently separated. They said one of the patrol Elders laughed at them and said if they were lucky, maybe they'll see each other again in the Breeding Center. Do you know where it is?" Bruin replies.

"I don't know for sure, but I heard Elder Barret whispering to a patrol Elder. They said the center is at the most Northern point of the land strip. They said it was placed in the middle of the strip with aqueducts of Fresh and Salt water leading back to each body of water. Bruin, I'm scared -" Hylie cuts off.

**PRESENT DAY - LIGHT FIELD**

Kyra snaps back into reality. Freshies and Salties used to live together? That doesn't make sense. Salties can't live in Freshwater and Freshies can't live in Saltwater. That's survival 101 on Planet Loryn. As Kyra exits the magical seagrass, their gills start dancing and their heart rate increases.

The landscape in front of them is humanly breathtaking. The field of light possesses a strange dichotomy between remote anonymity and clear evidence that this used to be some groupings' domain. There is seagrass planted around the entirety of the light field, even where seagrass would not have grown naturally. It looks like someone moved rock formations to create the proper soil conditions for the plant. It's as if there is a body of forest protecting its sacred organs. There are dug out paths around the formations with four dug out holes at each corner of the field. Kyra walks timidly in the paths, ready to swim for safety at any moment. They reach one of the dug out holes at the right upper corner of the landscape.

"Holy cobalt," Kyra whispers as they look out.

They are standing in the perfect vantage point. They can see every single light tunnel, hundreds of them! But, that's not all they can see. Each formation has a distinct shape like the box and handle at their favorite rock. There are lumps of sand at the lower corners of each formation. Everything looks deserted and sanded over by years and years of abandonment; left untouched. Kyra reaches down and uses their webbed hand to dust over the top of the lumps. It takes Kyra over 20 human minutes to uncover the large slabs of stone, similar in shape and



function to human pieces of paper. On the large slabs, Kyra sees various codes that align with each base that emits the silver lights.

**Cassiopeia**

**(cluster furthest away from commune)**

**Left Top Point One FLASH = Yes**

**Left Top Point Two FLASHES = No**

**Left Bottom Point One FLASH = Hi**

**Left Bottom Point Two FLASHES = Bye**

Kyra reads as the listings go on and on with hundreds of stones lined up with various light formations.

**FLASH!**

Kyra spots the flash occurring two clusters to their left.

“Is anyone there?” the light illuminates.

Kyra can barely hold their excitement and curiosity. “Yes,” Kyra flashes hesitantly.

“Hi! I have never received a response before. Is it safe?” the light flashes.

“Are you stable?” Kyra fumbles. This whole swimming in a maze thing is exhausting.

“What? Yes, I guess I am stable. I’ve been trying to reach someone in the Salt body! I need your help. My connection partner was taken to the Breeding Center against their will. I tried to stop them, but the patrol attacked and arrested me. I just got out of the patrol cells, but no one will help me,” the flashes continue.

Kyra is not surprised.

There was never a ban on who you could be with, but the Elder patrol does make it their business to remind couplings that their connection partner could be taken away at any second. It’s not like your Earth. Kyra’s species never categorized themselves by “men” and “women.” But, the ancestors couldn’t risk future division. Better for them to make a physical division themselves than risk a full-blown gender revolution. The last gender revolution on Earth was the beginning of its demise, and Planet Loryn’s ancestors watched it happen.

Kyra doesn’t know this part, but they know enough to suspect that something is not right.

“I’m so sorry. But, you’ll get them back at the end of Breeding season, right?” Kyra asks.

“You know just as well as I do that they never come back the same as they go in. They’re gonna suck the life right of them,” even the flashes have a hopeless tone to them.

“I know this sounds crazy and I know you aren’t connected with me, but I’m gonna find a way to the Breeding Center. I don’t care if they catch me, and I don’t care if they throw me in a patrol cell for the rest of my wave years. I need to do this and I know it’s the right thing to do,” the flashes continue.

Kyra’s head starts to spin. A rogue adventure to the Breeding Center? Are they crazy? But then, Kyra starts to feel the allure of a tugging feeling in their gut. As odd as it might sound, Kyra has never been asked to be a part of something. Their community exiled them from any Breeding activities due to their left foot. The Salt body community wanted nothing to do with them. They didn’t offer perfect genetics and the Elders were only interested in just that:

perfection. But, that's the silly contradiction of "perfection." Who decides what perfect means? Everyone in Kyra's surrounding community possessed *normal* this and *normal* that, but *normal* isn't *perfect*. Is it?

"Let's do it," Kyra flashes with a determined grin on their face. They swim around feeling a little lighter. Kyra glides in and out of the luminescent tunnels. They graze the outer edges of the tunnels as they swim up and down, left and right, using their body as a spinning apparatus. Each time they feel the light, it enters through their rubbery gray skin, traveling through the veins of their arms, circling around their torso like a dancing light, and finally exiting through their toes.

This is Kyra's favorite part about the lights, it also has been. When the light exits their toes, it's the only time that Kyra feels connected with their rejected limb. It's like the light is telling them that their shame isn't actually shame; as if the light is ripping off the disguise of shame that has been forcibly placed there and replacing it with shining potential.

### **PRESENT DAY- TIME TO LEAVE THE CORAL COMMUNITY**

Kyra traces the coral walls of their bedroom with their netted fingers. The rough divots lightly scrape Kyra's rubbery skin; it almost tickles. Kyra's never left their coral home before. Only Elders are allowed to leave the coral community for long periods of time. But, in order to achieve the status of an Elder, you have to partake in 20 Breeding seasons.

Kyra frowns as they always do when they think about this particular dilemma. How were they supposed to become an Elder when they aren't allowed to partake in anything to do with Breeding? Kyra lets out a long sigh. They don't understand how it's possible that there are no other groupings like them. If the Breeding Center never makes *mistakes*, what the cobalt was Kyra doing here?

"Ow!" Kyra yelps as a sharp groove in the coral pricks their index finger. Kyra's species possess five fingers like you, but they are all webbed together working as one body.

Kyra watches as the few drops of deep, dark gray blood float away from their finger. They feel the hair from the ends of their braids brush their shoulders causing them to shiver. This is not the time for distractions.

Kyra finishes their packing and grabs a sliver of basalt rock. They had etched the rock with directions to the edge of the landstrip where the Fresh grouping is going to meet them. By the end of their conversation last Earth night, Kyra felt a weird sensation towards this mysterious grouping. It wasn't a sexual feeling or even kinship. It was a feeling deep in their bones, the essence of their very being.

Maybe it was the fact that Kyra had never felt seen before. Maybe it was because their mundane just got slapped in the face with the extraordinary. But, Kyra knew it was more than this. It felt as if someone was behind them nodding in encouragement at every step Kyra takes.

Kyra swerves through the various holes in the coral leading the way out. They pass their fellow groupings sleeping in their plush sea anemone beds. Each bedroom has two groupings, two beds, two abalone mirrors, and two shelves made of hollowed out dark basalt stone. Kyra

lets out an involuntary gasp as their face hits the cooler temperature of the ocean water outside of the reef.

They turn around and look at their mile-long intricate home. Kyra feels a twang of guilt picturing Elder Locat's face when they figure out Kyra isn't in their assigned room. Kyra takes a deep breath and heads out on their adventure.

### **PRESENT DAY - MEETING POINT**

Kyra knows they arrive at the meeting point early because the sun is not directly overhead. Kyra giggles as they think about the journey they had just completed. At first, Kyra was scared by the vastness of the ocean. They felt as if something could creep up on them at any moment and swallow them whole. But, the faster they swam, the more in control they felt.

Kyra smiles as they remember the moment the dolphins joined them. Kyra has never felt air on their skin like they did when they mimicked the dolphins swimming style. Kyra felt light and free from the permanent pressure of the ocean's swaddling body. They even enjoyed the swarms of fish that would force them to slow down. For the first time, Kyra could taste the freedom of the ocean. Kyra pops their head out of the water and takes an unfamiliar deep breath of air.

"Hello?" Kyra hears from a close deep voice.

"I'm over here!" Kyra yells, suddenly realizing that they don't even know this group's name.

Kyra watches as a small figure emerges from the large leaves of a tree reminiscent of the Amazon. Kyra can't help but draw in a quick breath, still surprised by the unfamiliar expansion in their chest. The figure has the same dark gray skin as Kyra, but they are taller and broader. Where Kyra has braids, this group has knotted brown hair that just touches the top of their small ears. The figure has no breasts and is wearing sea kelp protection where their fertilizing appendage exists. But what sticks out the most is the group's left foot. They are missing the webbing material in between their toes just like Kyra.

"Hi, my name is Kyra," Kyra says softly, suddenly shy.

"Hi, my name is Rylo. We don't have much time. Elder patrols will canvas this area eventually, so we have to move. Come on," Rylo says as they extend their webbed hand towards Kyra.

Kyra hesitates. They've never done this before. This is the decision that really marks their adventure as real. But, reality comes with real consequences. Kyra shakes their head.

"Let's do this," Kyra says as they meet Rylo's hand.

The instant Kyra touches Rylo's hand they feel the same electric charge as when they touch the light tunnels.

"Woah, what was that?!" Kyra shrieks.

"I don't know! That's the same feeling I get when I touch the stars!" Rylo replies.

"Stars?"

"The beams of light. Our ancestors called them stars, or at least that's what the seagrass told me," Rylo answers as they help Kyra stand on the land strip.

“Woah!” Kyra yells as they almost lose their footing. The ground is wet and buoyant.

“Dig your toes in like this,” Rylo says softly as they flex their toes, separating each one. Then they use their toes to penetrate the soil and anchor their weight. “It feels weird at first, but this is why our feet are like this. We were made to walk here, Kyra.”

The cold, soft soil feels foreign to the untouched crevasses in between Kyra’s toes. Rylo starts to walk faster. It looks almost like a dance. Rylo anchors their left foot, while sliding their right foot to the front of their body, and then hopping their left foot to anchor again.

“Wait! Before we go any further, I need some answers,” Kyra says.

“I told you we don’t have much time,” Rylo says as they turn their head back to look at Kyra.

“Fine, but only for a moment. What do you want to know?” Rylo asks in a hurried voice.

“What are stars? What do you mean by the seagrass talking to you? Why is your foot like mine? How did you know my foot was going to be like yours?” Kyra fires at them.

“The seagrass that surrounds the stars is magic. It holds the memories of our ancestors. They call the light stars. I’m not completely sure why, but it has something to do with Earth. Our ancestors used to have feet like ours. All groupings and Elders did. But, they don’t want us on land. From what I can gather, our ancestors voted on how to deal with a problem that killed Earth. I don’t exactly know what the problem was, but it was bad. So our ancestors divided us and created the Breeding Center. Since we weren’t allowed on land anymore, our species evolved to grow webbing between our toes. You and I are remnants of the physiological makeup of our ancestors. I can’t explain how I knew your foot was like mine. It’s like someone has been with me during this whole journey, guiding me towards the right path,” Rylo says patiently.

“Okay...” Kyra trails off trying to digest everything.

“If I only knew exactly where the Breeding Center was,” Rylo says more to himself than Kyra.

“I know where it is! I was in the seagrass and I think it told me where it is!” Kyra squeals.

“Amazing! I’ll follow you!” Rylo matches Kyra’s excited tone.

Kyra turns to walk towards the direction they can feel is right, but then stops. They suddenly feel shy and self-conscious about their movement on land. Without trying to make their embarrassment too obvious, Kyra anchors their toes into the soil and slides their right foot up in front of them. With a deep breath, Kyra then hops their left foot as far forward as they can, repeating the anchoring process.

“So, who was your connection partner?” Kyra asks as they anchor and slide towards the northernmost point on the planet’s land strip.

“Is. Who is my connection partner. Their name is Shawnt. We’ve been connected since we were starting out as groupings. We had been waned off our various Breeders and the Elders put us in the same coral community. But, my pretend limp made it impossible for me to be put into Breeding consideration...and Shanwt...well, they’re perfect. The spitting image of a perfect Breeder,” Rylo says oozing contempt.

“Do you remember your time in the Breeding Center? Of the groupplings that actually acknowledged me, none of them could remember their time in the Breeding Center...neither can I,” Kyra says.

“No. I think they do something to all of us to make sure we don’t remember. They keep so many secrets from us. It’s not right. Something is not right. I can feel it,” Rylo says.

“I can feel it too...I just wish I knew what *it is*,” Kyra replies.

Both groupplings move in silence for a while. Kyra can feel their toes getting sore and tired from tensely holding their weight. They can hear various birds chirping and the rustle of tree leaves in the wind. This was kind of the perfect incognito path. The groupplings were almost fully encompassed by the canopy of the jungle. The dark green leaves glisten against the bright blue sky and burning sun. Just as they are nearing the north point, Kyra begins to tingle.

“Do you feel that?” Rylo asks?

“Yes, but I don’t know what *that is*,” Kyra whispers.

“I think we are -” Rylo stops as they come into view of a large, red brick building.

Kyra gulps as they take in the view. The red building is sitting in the middle of the land strip. It looks about half a mile long and three stories tall. There are Elders walking in various directions near the building, but none of them see the groupplings. Kyra watches as a bunch of groupplings are being brought in on stretchers. As they look closer, Kyra realizes that these groupplings are from their coral home. There’s Petrise that constantly bullied Kyra, and Sapphire who constantly made fun of Kyra’s foot.

“Why aren’t they moving?” Kyra whispers to Rylo.

“The Elders gave them something to make them fall asleep. I saw them do that to Shawnt before they carried them away on those stretchers. Follow me. I think I know how to get in,” Rylo answers.

Kyra follows Rylo as they head to a small circular container 50 feet behind the Breeding Center.

“I saw this while talking to the seagrass. This is where they throw out old Elder robes like the ones those patrol Elders are wearing,” Rylo says as they take off the light yellow lid of the circular container.

Rylo hands Kyra a tan robe. The material feels scratchy against Kyra’s skin as they put it on. Rylo reaches deeper into the vessel so that they are almost falling into it. Rylo returns to the upright position with a smile and two pairs of tan slippers.

“Perfect! The seagrass showed me they wore these things on land, but I wasn’t sure! Now we can hide our feet, Kyra!” Rylo says excitedly.

Kyra wears a tight, forced smile as they slide on the slippers. This is all happening very fast.

“Let’s go!” Rylo exclaims.

Rylo grabs Kyra’s hand and leads them to the front of the Breeding Center. Kyra fights every cell in their body screaming at them to turn around and return to safety. But, their reef isn’t *really* safe, is it? Rylo and Kyra walk on the rocky path, designed to allow any member of the

species to walk upon it with ease. The slimy moss is nowhere to be seen. There are no doors within the Breeding Center like your human buildings. Everything is open. The first thing the groupplings hear as they enter the heart of the building is screaming. Kyra doesn't know where to turn their head because in every direction is screaming. This doesn't make sense. There are Elders walking around with smiles, exchanging small talk while blood curdling screams are echoing and bouncing off the brick walls. Rylo continues to pull Kyra through hallways like a horror maze. Kyra tries to focus on the smooth, light gray stone floors, and the grooves within the red bricks of the walls similar to the grooves in their coral walls. Suddenly, they approach the outside of a large room. There is a glass-like substance that separates Kyra and Rylo from the interior of the room.

"What the..." Kyra trails off.

The room looks like it's inhabiting around 30 groupplings all chained to a bed like you would see in your human hospital. Every single grouppling looks like they have been blown up. Then, Kyra realizes they are pregnant. They all have tubes in their noses that lead back to a bag full of an orange substance.

"This is our stagnant stage," an Elder says, ten feet away from Kyra and Rylo. The Elder seems to be giving a tour to a new batch of patrollers.

"What is the process before this stage?" a new recruit asks.

"Well, your assigned mentor should have quizzed you on this. But, after we decide who is physically fit enough to be a Breeder, we inject them with a jellyfish serum that knocks them out for a while. This is important because?" the elder asks.

"So they can't remember where the Breeding Center is," a recruit answers.

"Exactly. Then, we decide which groupplings will reproduce the best with each other. This part can get a little rowdy because some of these groupplings have connection partners already. So, we usually give them a mix of jellyfish serum and oyster serum. This knocks them out enough to the point where they don't really know what's going on, but the oyster helps get them in the mood. Once the two groupplings latch, we immediately send the impregnated grouppling here, where they will grow the infant until birth," the Elder says in a matter of fact tone.

"Why are they all asleep? Does each grouppling do this once?"

"We can't risk any problems with the allowance of conscious thought. Each chosen grouppling has about 10-20 infants. Then, we give them another serum that will make them forget their time here. They may never fully regain their cognitive function, but they have served their community, and for that, they are *proud*," the Elder says with actual pride.

"This isn't right," Kyra whispers. "People need to know."

"I need to find Shawnt," Rylo says.

Rylo begins to move quickly, rounding each corner with more and more speed. Finally, they make it to the Breeding room. Kyra lets out an involuntary shriek. Each pair of groupplings are separated by a white cloth in a space no bigger than 10-by-10 feet. The contents of these small cubby-like spaces are horrific. The groupplings are stumbling around naked, making incoherent noises with blank stares.

“He’s right there,” Rylo says, pointing to the sheet closest to the door.

“Rylo...we can’t just-” Kyra says as Rylo slams their fist against the glass-like structure; the drugged out groupings don’t even flinch.

“I’m so close to him and I can’t do anything about it!” Rylo screams.

“Shhhhhhhh. Rylo, it’s okay. We will figure something out,” Krya says while placing their hand on Rylo’s shoulder, like Elder Locat had once done for Kyra.

Kyra feels a jolt of electricity. It’s that presence *again*. That feeling of electricity. That feeling that Kyra felt when they first touched the stars. That feeling Kyra felt when the seagrass talked to them. The stars....the seagrass....that’s it!

“Rylo, I know what we need to do. But, right now we need to go,” Kyra says in a soft tone.

“Not again. Please, not again,” Rylo says with tears in their eyes.

“Trust me,” Kyra says.

Kyra pulls on Rylo’s hand this time. Kyra leads the way out of the Breeding Center holding their breath each time they pass a group of Elders. But, that’s the thing. Kyra and Rylo are so used to being invisible and cast aside that they know how to play the part perfectly. They scamper down the rocky path and make it to their initial hiding place where they first viewed the building.

“Okay, here’s what we need to do. You and I are going back to my community. We are going to start by showing them you exist and can exist in our water too. Then, we are going to lead everyone to the stars and seagrass, so they can see for themselves. We are going to fix this, Rylo. We are going to get Shawnt back I promise,” Kyra pulls Rylo’s head between their hands to make sure Rylo is absorbing their plan.

“What if they don’t listen to us? Have they ever listened to us?” Rylo asks in a defeated tone.

“We will make them listen to us,” Kyra states determinedly.

Kyra doesn’t wait for a response. Instead, they grab Rylo’s hand and begin the anchorage skipping dance to the edge of the Saltwater. As they approach the edge, Kyra turns back towards the land strip. Everything they knew about their planet was wrong. Their species weren’t supposed to have the ability to walk on land. Their species weren’t supposed to possess the ability to exist in both bodies of water. Most importantly, their species were supposed to be *free*. It is through all of this wrong that Krya was finally able to discover the right. Kyra looks down at their left foot, and for the first time they didn’t view it as wrong. Hell, this foot was about to save their freaking planet.

### **PRESENT DAY - ANCESTOR’S REMARK**

So, I guess it’s true that our ancestors embody our mistakes. We just didn’t overcome them, at least not by Kyra’s time. As Kyra’s ancestor, I tried to correct Earth’s wrongs, but I was outvoted by the means in which to accomplish it. I never wanted a Breeding Center. I never wanted division. But, you’d have to experience the circumstances we were under. Your planet

had just died because of a social construct that you humans literally made up! We had underestimated the power of social constructs. So, we eradicated them. We failed to see that through the process of eradication, we were creating equally unjust practices. That's why I stole the stars of Earth's sky and planted the magic seagrass. I knew one day that two grouplings would find them. When Kyra and Rylo touched my stars, I knew that they were the ones. I talked to them through their senses to keep them on the right path. I might not have had the power to right the wrongs over 3000 years ago. But, through revealing the wrongs, I have led Kyra and Rylo to the right. They will be the ancestors that overcome the social construct of gender. They will overcome your mistakes. They will overcome our mistakes.