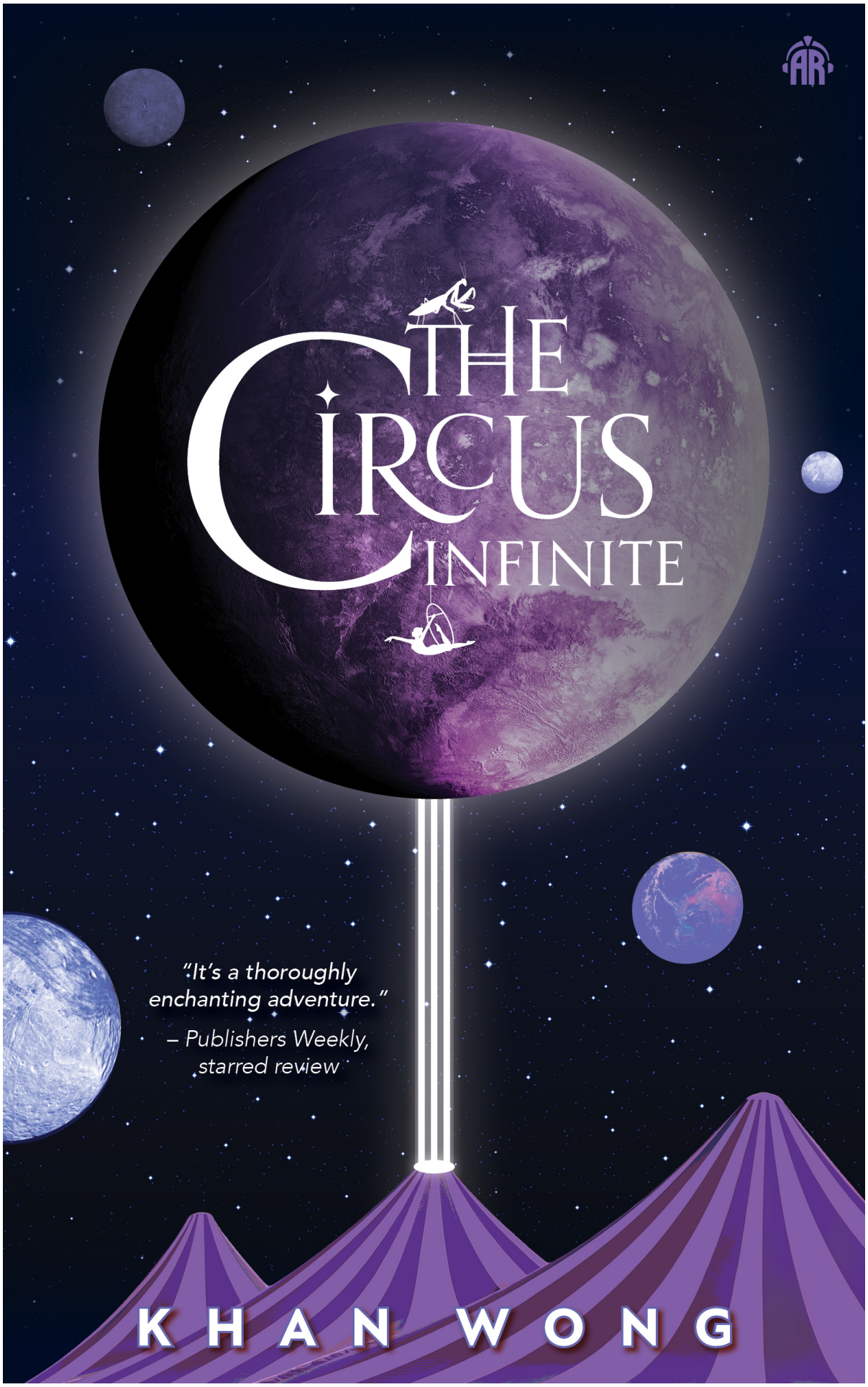
THE CIRCUS INFINITE
"It's a thoroughly enchanting adventure."
– Publishers Weekly, starred review
KHAN WONG

PRAISE FOR KHAN WONG

"Khan Wong gives us an adventure that reaches all the right hard-hitting space fantasy notes while protecting a tender heart of inclusivity and respect. Featuring an ace protagonist, the consent dynamics of the book are particularly adept. The Circus Infinite *explores the nuances of gender and sexuality while punching you in the gut with soaring feats of gravity and interrogations that will make you gasp out loud."*

TJ Berry, author of *Space Unicorn Blues*

"Wong luxuriates in sweet scenes between Jes and his first love, Bo, and develops heartwarming found family dynamics in Jes's other relationships. The worldbuilding is just alien enough while still inviting readers in, and it's a pleasure to witness the world through the lens of its progressive social dynamics. It's a thoroughly enchanting adventure."

Publisher's Weekly, starred review.

"The Circus Infinite *is an action-packed tale of found family set against a finely wrought canvas of different genders, cultures, and sexuality. Jes's journey of personal discovery is as fascinating as it is heart-warming. This one is sure to both entertain and enlighten the reader."*

Ginger Smith, author of *The Rush's Edge*

"Khan Wong has made the book for which so many of us have been yearning! The Circus Infinite *is not only a gripping science-fiction tale set in a lushly imagined universe teeming with fabulous aliens, extraordinary powers, and political drama, but also a story that celebrates our real, lived spectrum of gender and sexuality. To top it all off, it revolves around a circus, the perfect manifestation of outsider community, artistic expression, and a sense of wonder.* The Circus Infinite *renews faith in the power of science fiction to represent our world even as it lifts our imagination beyond it."*

Justin Hall, editor of *No Straight Lines*

"This dazzling space opera debut is a real delight, set in a vivid, inclusive future full of lively characters and showy set pieces. Running away to join the circus has never been more fun!"

Tim Pratt, Hugo Award-winning SF and Fantasy author

"The Circus Infinite *is both elegiac and majestic, with vibrant characters and a real sense of art at its heart. It soars like a trapeze artist."*

Ferrett Steinmetz, author of *Flex*

Khan Wong

THE CIRCUS INFINITE

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89 Shepperton Road
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Come one, come all!

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For Marty – my greatest joy will always be sitting under the oak tree with you

CHAPTER ONE

After an hour scoping out the waves of tourists flowing in and out of the terminal, Jes spots what he's been waiting for: a clueless human clearly on his first trip away from Indra. One of those who are completely unaware of their surroundings, of the possibility of ruffians in their midst. The man fumbles with a bag as the holographic stripe of the pass pokes out of his slacks, winking at every passerby. A quick bump of shoulders and a swipe so delicate it barely happens, and Jes has a ticket off this miserable hell world also known as his home planet.

Overhead, glass panels set within the vaulted arches stream with rainbow-stained light. Holographic displays glow in amber, green and blue, destinations and launch times scrolling over their sleek surfaces. Travelers of multiple species, but mostly human and Rijala, move through the atrium as if performing some kind of obscure choreography. Jes casts his eyes about looking for orderlies but there's no sign of them. The spaceport is clear.

A Bezan girl behind the ticketing counter returns his smile, both of them performing the expected expressions of friendliness. "Slip and return to Opale Lunar Station, please." He looks into the camera set in the counter – he wants to make sure he's recorded making this transaction.

"Opale! Are you going for the Mudraessa Festival?" the

ticketing agent asks. Her eyes are wide and gem-toned, a brilliant cerulean blue, deepened by the violet-to-purple tones of her skin. Her hair is pulled back, but maintains the characteristic phosphorescence of Bezan hair.

"Yes…" He scans her uniform for her name-tag, "Alys. I love opera in all its forms. Ever since I was little. I've never heard Mudraessa, of course, since the Asuna don't allow it off-world. It's supposed to be the most perfect. That's what everyone says. I can't wait to listen with my own ears." Jes can't stand opera, but in the moment he's quite certain that whoever he's pretending to be loves it deeply. Jes's mother and father wouldn't stop going on about the festival after they attended that one time, but he's glad he retained some tidbit to deploy now. He decides he doesn't want to think about them though, and fidgets with the strap of the satchel on his shoulder.

"Well, you must be thrilled to have gotten lucky in the lottery. The Asuna are so restrictive about off-worlders on Opale."

"Yes, I'm very lucky."

She arches an eyebrow as she proceeds with the transaction. With his empathic sense, he susses mainly indifference – he's one of many such transactions today and she doesn't really care, however well she fakes it.

"Node?"

He hands over the sleek palm-curved pebble of glass; she takes it and slips it into a groove on the surface of her workstation. Jes's buddy in town helped him get the alias – a favor banked for all the locks picked and safes cracked over the months they ran together before the Institute got him.

"You're all set," Alys says.

"Thanks." He takes the node back and slips it into his pocket.

On his way to the gate, the blazing white of orderly uniforms sets panic alarms pinging in his head. *Shit…* Jes looks around wildly for the nearest exit, heart pounding, sweat prickling at his skin.

No wait, he breathes. *Not them. Just a couple wearing matching white outfits.*

Jes exhales relief. Flashes of his past come to him without warning – the orderlies at the Institute, stunning him, shocking him, injecting him. All to make him weak and compliant. The pain. So much pain…

Jes shakes his head to clear his mind. How long will people wearing all white set him off?

At the departure gate he scans his node. With a beep and a flash of green light, he's registered boarded. He heads toward the boarding ramp, then spins on his heels, bringing a hand to his forehead in fake befuddlement. His pulse quickens as it always does when he's about to lie.

"I left my briefcase at the cafe!" he exclaims to the no nonsense Rijala gate attendant. It's the first thing that comes to mind, despite the fact that he doesn't look like the briefcase-carrying type. "Can I just run and get it? It won't take long."

"We depart in ten minutes," she says flatly without looking at him. She tucks a stray lock of hair behind her ear and smiles at the next passenger, simultaneously welcoming them and abruptly dismissing him.

Her disdain for Jes pokes like bony fingers. He can't tell if she's annoyed by him being a forgetful passenger, or if it's because his typically Rijalen blue-white hair and silver eyes combined with his human-toned, deep-tan skin makes his mixed heritage obvious. Rijala don't like hybrids much, but are always just short of being outright discriminatory.

"I'll be quick," he promises, despite the fact that she is no longer listening. His heart pounds like it did when he busted his way out of the Institute, but nobody is chasing him this time. He wipes his sweaty palms on his trouser legs as he walks away, then tosses the node into the first waste bin he walks by. The decoy alias has served its purpose. He's on his way to Opale, as far as anybody tracking him is concerned.

From the satchel on his shoulder, he pulls out the cape he

acquired from one of the vendors in the bazaar outside the spaceport. It's made of green satin rimmed with gold – gaudy trying to look classy. It's a much more ridiculous thing than he'd normally wear, which is entirely the point.

The cape slips lightly over his shoulders, and he delights in the fake luxury of it, the aspiring glamor. He puts up the hood as he scans a destination board. He takes out the purloined all-travel pass; the rounded edges are smooth against his fingertips as he worries it. He can disappear on any world within the 9-Star Congress now. So… where?

He is tempted by a trip to Indra, but the Institute staff already know about his fondness for that world. It would definitely be the first place they'd think to look once they figure out he's not on Opale. Maybe a place that's the farthest away then? What star system would that be?

Vashtar. The principal world there is Lora, the other human world. Jes has met people from there before, and he didn't like them. They were polite, friendly even, but a strange aggression simmered under their surface. It rubbed roughly against his empathic sense, like sandpaper. It could have been down to the specific individuals he met, but his grandmother had warned him that they were like that; humans born there, who grew up without connection to Indra, come off that way. Though there are multiple species there, it's dominated by humans with this vibe. So – not there.

Also in the system is the notorious so-called pleasure moon, Persephone-9. That far-flung hunk of rock bears the most decadent reputation in the galaxy. The moon is truly a multispecies panoply as no single species dominates the mostly transient population there. The mix of his empathic sense and sexual aversion, however, would likely make being there uncomfortable at times. But, he reasons, that would be preferable to the harshness of Lora and maybe it would be easier to blend into the background in a place like that. Jes nods with his decision.

When he arrives at the departure gate for Port Ruby Station, he smiles to himself – with his cape, he fits right in. Of course the passengers traveling to a place famous for hedonism would be a colorful crowd! He can suss the general, collective feeling of the group: happy, buzzing anticipation. A lovey-dovey kind of vibe. He flips a panel of his cape over one shoulder in imitation of a Bezan dandy ahead of him in line – is this how these things are worn? In the crowd, he spots people of all the species that make up the 9-Star Congress, except the Mantodeans, who slipstream travel in their own vessels and by their own network of tubes.

There are even Asuna here – he has only seen them in person a couple of times, when his father received delegations as part of his duties as a commerce leader. He admires their pale green skin, the hints of yellow and white. Most of all, he admires their halos. The crystals sprout around the crown of their skulls and, like their eyes, appear in a multitude of colors.

An inner knowingness tells Jes he made the right call. He remembers childhood conversations with his grandmother when she explained the importance of that sensation. "Our intuition is the force of our life moving towards what will fulfill it, like a plant moves towards the sun. Follow its pull and you'll find what you need."

He hadn't been aware of it before but now, as he looks down at his all-travel pass, he gets it. He's grateful that even what he endured and witnessed at the Institute didn't overwrite this essential lesson his grandmother had imparted. He heeded it without thinking. It is a part of him still.

"Last call for Port Ruby Station, Persephone-9," the smooth robotic voice of the attendant intones. He flashes his pass for the scanner and is waved on board.

He grabs an empty seat among some humans and straps in. Behind his eyes, his grandmother's face smiles – she is still teaching him about intuition. In his pocket, he carries his only memento from the life he is fleeing, a crystal shard on a

delicate yet strong chain of tiny titanium links, threaded with colored spheres of other coded minerals. His grandmother had given it to him on his tenth birthday. It is the only tether he has to his past.

"I can't wait to hit the clubs," a young human behind him says to her Rijala companion. "We'll have a couple of nights before the forest gathering."

"I've heard the forest is beautiful," her friend responds. "This is my third trip to Persephone-9 and I still haven't been to that side of the moon."

"That's because you're a party whore," the original speaker teases.

"You flatter me!"

The two friends laugh as the shuttle vibrates, preparing to depart. With the vibration comes relief – he is *really* escaping now. He can see Matheson's face in his mind – the pale skin that obviously did not get enough sun, the pale, watery blue eyes, the limp ashy blond hair and the fake smile that didn't hide the man's impatience nearly as much as he thought it did. The man who thinks of Jes as his prize lab animal. He hopes to never see that face again. But a deep buzzing in his intuitive sense tells him that he will, someday. But right now he has to focus on getting away. He can only hope that "someday" is far, far away.

The chatter about party plans, and which casinos are best, and which clubs have the best vibes, all settles down as the engines increase their pitch. Jes leans back as the shuttle glides gently to the guiding strip. It hovers a moment before the press of speed pushes him into his seat and they launch out of the bay, away from the city, the ground, the planet of Rijal, the Institute and all its horrors.

In seconds they've pierced the atmosphere and zoom out into open space. From where he's sitting there's no porthole, but a viewscreen option is available. Once they're in space he shuts it off, knowing there will be a viewing deck when the lounge

opens. Instead, he looks around at the rabble surrounding him. The range of species comforts him. Definitely the right call.

There are Rijala and Bezans. There are humans of various shades of brown and a bewildering array of hair textures and colors. A couple of Hydraxians occupy a wide bench on the side of the shuttle. They're orange-skinned and four-armed, and against his empathic sense are much softer than one would guess from the sour expressions they wear. As a hybrid himself, Jes feels more comfortable in this multi-species array than he ever did among homogenous Rijala society.

The ones who fully captures Jes's attention, however, are the Asuna sitting a row ahead on the other side of the craft. With their hoods down, the characteristic iridescence of their skin is visible from this distance. He can also see that the crystals that sprout from their heads are a deep emerald green. If he remembers his Asuna sociology correctly, emerald green is the Council Class of civic and cultural leaders. One of them looks younger than the others, and she doesn't have the shimmer yet – a characteristic only the fully mature members of the species manifest. He remembers being told that they often looked younger than they were and that their lifespans were much longer than that of the other known humanoid species. He guesses they are a family unit, as their halos are all the same color. But he is confused. If they are as upper caste as he thinks, why would they be taking a common transport?

The two females wear their long hair in ornate braids; the younger one's hair is the color of rose gold and her braids sit loosely around her face, while the older one's braids are knotted atop her head and are a deep auburn in color. The brilliant green of their crystal halos reminds Jes disconcertingly of the serum they shot him up with in the lab, the one that kept him sedated and unable to use his ability while they performed the more invasive procedures. He remembers the heavy, sleepy feeling falling on him. How everything moved real slow, how

the places in his body where his ability usually buzzed went numb and dark and cold. But he is not numb now.

Jes wakes from a dreamless sleep to find the shuttle well into its time in the slipstream. The lounge is open, so he gets up to stretch his legs. Standing at the viewport that takes up almost a whole bulkhead, he stares out at the lightshow before him. The slipstream, gift of Zo, the sentient star who called to order the 9-Star Congress of Conscious Worlds, displays colors of violet and indigo and white as they writhe and intertwine and shift between shades. The stream cuts the length of interstellar travel to a fraction of the time that such trips take in regular space at sub-light speed. Jes doesn't fully understand how it all works. He suspects most folks don't.

"It's so beautiful," a voice says from beside him. "I've never seen it in person before. Have you?" It's the Asuna girl, and she's speaking Ninespeak without first asking if he knows it. But, he supposes, it's probably a safe assumption that anyone going to Persephone-9 would know the common language used in the unaffiliated sectors.

"Yes," Jes answers in Ninespeak also. "A few times. But it's been a while."

"Esmée." She bows slightly as she says this, then looks at him expectantly.

He struggles to remember what he learned in his Interspecies Etiquette class and dredges up a vague lesson on greetings. The Asuna simply state their names and bow, by way of introducing themselves.

He's about to give the name of his discarded alias, but then remembers that Asuna are empathic, in their own way. He reasons that in this moment, the truth makes the most sense to give. His intuition pings back to him that this is the right call.

"Jes," he says, bowing back.

She says something that sounds like "orkut". The r sound rolls like a purr.

"I'm sorry – I don't speak Mudra-nul."

She laughs. "It means 'well met.' I think humans would say 'nice to meet you.' Though it could also mean 'nice to see you.' You are human and Rijala? I hope it's not rude of me to ask." She seems about to say something more but holds back.

"Yes, I am. Human mother, Rijala father."

"I'm sorry if I'm prying. Hybrids aren't common where I'm from."

Jes is aware of the Asuna's reputation for xenophobia – their restrictions on other species visiting their homeworld is well known. "It's fine," he says.

"Is your human side Loran or Indran?"

He wonders if all Asuna are this direct or if it's just this Esmée person. "My mother's from Indra. But I was born and grew up on Rijal."

"So do you possess the Indran talents?"

"I can see auric fields when I concentrate. And I have the intuitive and empathic senses, but I'm not emerged so no telepathy or telekinesis or any of that stuff. But even if I were emerged, psi-abilities don't work away from the world of origin anyway. That's true of Emerged Ones from all species."

"Of course. I wasn't thinking." She pauses. "I haven't met many other species. This is my first trip off Opale."

This doesn't really surprise him, but he holds his tongue and looks back out at the lightshow. "Some people have questioned whether all Consciousness Holders could access their abilities if they were in orbit of Zo, since it connects all our worlds."

"That's an interesting question."

A few others join them on the observation deck. The Rijala keep their distance from the other passengers and look askance at everyone, especially the humans and Bezans from whom they turn away if one gets too close. It's as if they fear picking up some kind of parasite from them. Odd how the Asuna have

the xenophobic reputation while it's Rijala who behave like this in public. A pair of Bezans, whose bright clothes give off the insistent smell of reef and incense, giggle together in a corner and point at the slipstream lights. He wonders if they experience the streaming colors differently than he does.

"Are they your parents?" he asks. "The two you're traveling with?"

She nods. The slipstream reflects in the golden glint of her eyes.

"I'm surprised to see Asuna of your status traveling by shuttle."

She smiles wryly. "Persephone-9 is a place of depravity. Any Asuna who wishes to sully themselves by going there may only do so by common means, regardless of status." She meets his eyes and adds, "Those are the rules. My mother isn't happy about it."

"So why are you going? Needing some depravity?"

She laughs. "You're funny. No. My mother must deliver some news to a relative who lives there."

"Do you not have comms where you're from?" Jes susses her curiosity, openness and a friendliness he hasn't encountered all that much in his life. He finds himself relaxing in her presence and is relieved he can still have a conversation with someone without having his guard up.

"This news must be delivered in person," she answers. "It is our custom. Most Asuna don't have to go off-world to do it though."

"I'm going to guess it's not happy news?"

"My aunt died. My mother's sister. We're on our way to inform my cousin."

"I'm sorry for your loss."

"Thank you." He senses sadness from her, but gets the feeling it isn't really connected to her aunt. She stands with her arms crossed, looking out the viewport; her halo's deep green crystals glitter in the reflection it holds. She has smaller

crystals too, along her collarbone and at her wrists – these aren't as dark and shine a bit brighter.

"Are you training in an approved field for your caste?" It's an awkward change of subject, but he figures she probably won't mind not lingering on the death in her family.

"In my own way," she replies. "Emeralds are civic and cultural leaders, mostly in the realm of policy and administration. But I hope to be an artist. Artists are technically a type of cultural leader but it's rare for Emeralds to pursue the arts. It's not unheard of, of course, though Rubies are more typically artists. In my opinion, artists are the ultimate cultural leaders – I mean, they're the ones that actually give creative expression to a society, a culture. Somehow, bureaucrats took over that leadership."

He picks up a resentment that is familiar in its emotion, if not in circumstance. "What kind of artist are you?"

She brightens at the question. "I'm training in Mudraessa – do you know what that is?"

He susses from her that she expects his ignorance. He is happy to surprise her. "Asuna opera," he responds. "I've never had the honor of witnessing it first-hand. But I understand it is the most harmonically perfect music produced by any species in the 9-Star Congress. Are you sad to be missing the festival?"

Incongruently, she smiles at this. "You're familiar with the festival?"

He shrugs. "I know of it. I know it's a big deal for off-worlders to be selected in the lottery to attend." He can tell she's impressed. "So, you're a singer then?"

Now she is less impressed. "If you must boil my identity down to such simplistic terms." After a pause, "So why are *you* going to Persephone-9?"

Jes hopes his face doesn't betray the fact that he hasn't thought about this part of his story. He had been so focused just on getting away from Matheson and the Institute that he hadn't yet invented a cover story for himself. He panics a little,

knowing that she is empathic too, but then remembers that the Asuna mode of empathy focuses almost exclusively on desire. Sexual desire. So his panic starts to ebb. But he wants to make a connection, so he makes what he hopes is a neutral-yet-cheerful expression. "Seeking my fortune, I guess."

"Surely finding your fortune relies on more than guessing?"

He smiles against the nervousness rising inside him as lies formulate on his tongue. "I have an uncle who runs one of the… casinos. I came to see him about a job. I didn't want to stay on Rijal anymore." At least that last statement is true. He brushes the knuckles of his left hand against the hem of his cape, taking comfort in the smooth coolness of the satin.

He stiffens reflexively as a green-haloed figure steps onto the deck, coming up behind Esmée. Her startling green eyes intimidate and judge, though she visibly relaxes as she gets closer to them, as if something she'd been worried about proved to be of no concern. Though he feels no desire, Jes's breath catches at the ripple of light and soft color across this older one's skin. The shimmer is truly hypnotic up close. Flashes of gemlike glamor glint across her face, up her temples, right up to the glittering crystal formation of her halo. She places a hand on Esmée's shoulder and the latter flinches at the touch.

"Attention passengers," the smooth AI voice says over the intercom. *"We are about to re-enter simple space. Please return to your seats and strap down."*

"Esmée," the tall Asuna woman says. "Come."

"I'm sorry for your loss," Jes says to Esmée's mother. She looks taken aback, and shoots her daughter a glance loaded with what can only be interpreted as annoyance.

She collects herself and sniffs. "Yes. Thank you, stranger. Esmée, come along. You know your father doesn't like to be alone in public."

"Nice talking to you, Jes."

"Yeah. You too."

Her mother says something to Esmée in Mudra-nul as they

walk away. She doesn't sound happy. She doesn't seem happy in general, but then again, her sister just died.

Jes has to go the same way they are, but he waits until they're out of the lounge before he does so, to avoid that awkward going-the-same-way-as-someone-you-just-said-goodbye-to thing.

As he takes his seat and straps down, the reality of his situation dawns on him. He may have eluded the Institute's – and Matheson's – grasp, but he'll need more money sooner than later, and a place to crash. He wonders how much rooms on Persephone-9 cost, then shudders at the thought of what a room on a pleasure moon would be used for. Especially one on his budget. He suddenly wishes he had paid more attention to the cleansing rituals his grandmother tried to teach him when he was a child.

The shuttle rumbles and shakes and the vertiginous rushing sensation of transitioning back to simple space overtakes his thoughts.

"We have entered the Vashtar System," the AI informs them. *"Arrival at Port Ruby Station, Persephone-9, in twelve minutes."*

He looks over at where Esmée sits with her parents. The older two have their hoods up, covering their halos and shimmers. He bets there are all kinds of hungry pervs on the pleasure moon who would pay handsomely for a romp with an Asuna. Esmée's mother doesn't seem the type who would tolerate a solicitation for a second. Her mother nudges Esmée and she puts her hood up also.

Jes wonders how the unbridled lustfulness of Persephone-9 must feel like for a species attuned to the desires of others. He decides it must be awful. He worries that it might be difficult enough for him – even though his empathy isn't fine-tuned to sexual desire to the same degree as the Asuna, he is able to sense general horniness. While he is not totally sex averse, Jes's asexuality means that even horniness is an uncomfortable thing for him to suss. He realizes then that Esmée must have

felt comfortable being near him because she could sense no desire in that way. Her mother's relief must have also been due to the same thing. He smiles, realizing that it's the first time his asexuality has felt like a huge positive.

Jes considers following them, thinking that they surely would have accommodation arrangements and would be heading for a much less sketchy area. Asuna of their status would likely be staying someplace nice. But nice meant more expensive.

From his pocket he pulls the dowsing crystal. Small colored beads punctuate the silver links: red, orange, yellow, green, blue, indigo, violet. He recalls memories of his grandmother: her kind, brown eyes lined with the traces of a lifetime of laughter; her white hair flowing and wild. *Help me find my way.* He releases this silent prayer as the shuttle jostles to its landing. The passengers immediately unstrap themselves, stand, smooth out their clothes and check their possessions. He stands too, slipping the crystal back in his pocket.

The hatch hisses open and, once it touches down on the dock, the passengers pour out. As space opens up around him, Jes relaxes, realizing how tense he'd been holding himself. He steps into the flow of people heading for the exit, for the transit stations and roto stands, and tosses the travel pass he used into a trash chute as he goes. He wants no traces of his escape from his former world left on his person.

This spaceport is not as grand as the one he departed from, but it feels much more comfortable. It takes several minutes for him to make his way through the terminal, then finally he steps outside onto a plaza bustling with vendors selling trinkets and refreshments. The air is redolent with incense and grilled food, and pulses with the syncopated rhythms pounded out by a group of Bezan buskers. A bowed instrument threads a sinuous melody over it all, adding dramatic accompaniment to the large pink petals that bloom and fall in the glowing arcs projected by the holographic lenses that curve around the

edge of the plaza. The city beyond is a kaleidoscope of neon, dizzying.

He holds the crystal in his fingertips as he makes his entreaty. "OK grandma, help me out here. Help me–" He's about to say "Help me find a place to rest," but decides that's too temporary – too much about surviving immediate circumstances. If he's really going to do this, he figures he should really go for it. "Help me find a place to belong. Help me find a home."

He lets the crystal hang, pinching the other end of the chain with thumb and forefinger. He breathes deep, exhaling for longer than his inhale. It's a technique Matheson taught him as a way to keep his ability under control during stress or panic. He hates that he learned anything from that man, but there were useful lessons mixed in with the torture.

Whether randomly or genuinely controlled by something ineffable, the crystal begins swinging at a distinct angle from Jes's chest, and points to the right. He walks in the direction the crystal indicates, looking up occasionally to make sure he's not about to walk into something or someone, but mostly keeping his attention on the crystal, watching for any change.

The surrounding area is awash in colors between the advertisements, the aesthetic displays and the signs. The neon catches in the crystal, an upside down refraction of the city. Then the crystal changes direction suddenly, back and forth in a horizontal line. He pivots left and walks straight ahead until something is in his way. It is a hologram advertisement for one of the many shows available in town, this one for something called *Cirque Kozmiqa*, a performance event of some kind happening at the Luna Lux Resort Casino.

He looks from the advertisement down to the crystal, still hanging from his fingers. "Really?" he asks. It hangs perfectly still.

He wishes he had a node and for a second regrets tossing his alias. But no. That subterfuge was necessary. No regrets. He looks around at the passersby, and spots a human woman in

a long, pink and glittery coat, lined at the edges with pink and white feathers, her hair a cloud of white above her oval face. "Excuse me!" he calls, catching her attention.

She eyes him warily, cautiously responds, "Yes?"

"Do you know how to get to–" he points at the holoboard "–the Luna Lux?"

Her face relaxes, and Jes susses her relief that here is a young man with a genuine, non-creepy question. She points down the avenue to a river of lights. "Do you see the big white beam shooting straight up into the sky? That's it."

He nods, understanding. "Thank you."

"Good luck," the stranger says as she sashays away, her long coat swinging behind her.

The upward beam doesn't look that far away, so Jes chooses to walk the distance. He doesn't want to spend what little coin he has on transit just yet. He steps off the plaza and onto the promenade, joining the hustle and bustle of Port Ruby.

Is he really going to go by what his grandmother's crystal told him to do? He doesn't really have another plan, and this at least provides him a destination. The column of light he walks towards is a beacon, the apparent next step. But, of course, he has no idea what he'll do once he gets there.