



# **OVERGROWTH**



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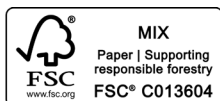
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# **OVERGROWTH**

**MIRA GRANT**

 Daphne Press

*For Merav.  
I told you so.*

**SEED**



Yet across the gulf of space, minds that are to our minds as ours are to those of the beasts that perish, intellects vast and cool and unsympathetic, regarded this earth with envious eyes . . .

—H.G. Wells, *The War of the Worlds*

Sometimes I wonder if pollution isn't humanity's way of denying how hard it is to build a wall against the stars.

—Stasia Miller

Fermi's Paradox, named after the esteemed physicist Enrico Fermi, asks an essential question about the existence of extraterrestrial life: namely, where is it? Given a universe the size of our own—functionally infinite when compared to something as small as a human being—and the number of planets we have already discovered which are potentially capable of supporting life, it seems impossible that we have not yet been visited by our neighbors. Yet conclusive proof of alien civilizations has not been found. Every sighting can be explained; every abduction can be swept away. We are, for all intents and purposes, alone.

Either life is vanishingly rare in the universe, or some other factor is at play. Perhaps intelligence is the rare quality: we may be surrounded by living worlds whose occupants have never risen above the level of common beasts. Or perhaps something, some great and terrible thing, prevents life from developing beyond a certain point. Perhaps we are alone, not because evolution has shown us any great favor, but because we have yet to come to the attention of that which keeps our skies devoid of company.

—from *The Fermi Paradox and the Milky Way*,  
by Anthony Vornholt, originally published 2030.

Anastasia has a vivid imagination and does not shy away from sharing her fantasies with the rest of the class. She needs to learn restraint, and when it's time to put pretend away and focus on the real world. It is slightly concerning how detailed her imaginary scenarios can become. She rarely deviates from the details of her make-believe once she has settled on them, and will argue with other students who attempt to contradict her.

It is not yet a problem for Anastasia to have such a rich fantasy life; at her age, this is fairly common. She should still be monitored in case of future issues telling the truth from fiction, as she will be expected to focus more on her studies as time goes by.

—letter home from Ms. Anne O'Toole, Kindergarten teacher.

Sent November, 2002.

# THE STORY

## 1.

This is a story. It can't hurt you anymore.

It's still important that you listen, because I am going to tell you things you need to know, and it will be easier for you to understand what's happening if you pay attention to me now. But if you get scared, or if you wonder why I'm making you listen to this, just remember that this is a story. There was a time when it could hurt you, but that time is over and done. You're safe. I'll protect you, I promise. I really, really do.

This is a story. You need to know how it starts.

It can't hurt you anymore.

## 2.

Like so many things, it begins with a seedpod, large and thick-skinned for protection, irregularly shaped to ease its passage through the air. It isn't aerodynamic, but where this seedpod floats, there isn't any atmosphere to pierce. It travels through the depths of space at a speed that no Earthly seedpod has ever approached, trapped in the frozen heart of a comet, followed by a bridal train of stardust and ice. It goes where gravity and orbital forces take it, and it knows nothing of where it is or where it came from. It is not aware.

In the beginning before the beginning that matters to us, this seedpod was one of dozens scattered through the same fertile cloud of icy planetesimals, left by a fruiting body long since passed. Ice and debris swirled around the seedpods, slowly coalescing into

comets, which broke loose from their nursery and began their long, uncharted trek through the cosmos. Some of them died before they could finish forming, never quite hardening, their cargos destroyed and undelivered. Others crashed into lifeless moons or were pulled into blazing suns, the ice melting in an instant, the seedpods crisping and dying only a moment later. But some . . .

Some, like this one, managed to soar on gravitational lines, dancing through the sky on their unknown and unknowable errands. One by one, this seedpod's fellows have dropped away, even the survivors, leaving it to chart its course alone.

The planet that lies ahead of it is blue green and bright, glowing with points of artificial light. The seedpod has passed it a dozen times before, but this time, ah. This time, there is debris in the air around it, artificial structures and satellites scattered through low orbit. This time, radio signals flutter and flash through the air. Something deep within the seedpod—something less organic than the seedpod itself, something less casually grown than the comet that protects it—sparks and flares to life, recording those signals, picking them quickly to pieces, like a centipede slicing up its prey with the ends of its razored legs.

The signals are good. The signs are good. The comet, which has flown past the planet so many times before, shudders, orbit suddenly adjusting from within rather than from without. It tilts, bending toward the gravitational field. It shakes, spinning wildly, shedding chunks of ice in all directions.

It is not a large comet. Not the sort of thing that attracts admirers or ends epochs. Only a few astronomers on the planet below notice its odd behavior. They take pictures, excited to capture a comet breaking up so close to the atmosphere; they notify their friends that something exciting is going on. They don't think any more of it. Why should they? Comets die all the time. The sky is a living thing, a void filled with points of slow, deliberate vitality.

The comet spins one last time and plunges below the orbital horizon. Gravity takes over, greedily grabbing for the projectile, like a child snatching the first pieces of candy out of a broken piñata. The last of the ice is ripped away. The surface of the seedpod bulges and contracts, exposed to the elements for the first time since it was nestled in its icy nursery.

The skin, a deep, pitted purple the texture of fruit leather, begins to crack. Gravity continues to pull. The skin splits, a seam running from one end of the seedpod to the other. And then, with no further ceremony or incentive, it falls away entirely, scattering seeds in its wake.

They are surprisingly small, these interstellar wanderers, each about the size of a withered apple or a squirrel's skull. They are wrinkled like walnuts, labyrinthine in their folds and channels. They fall, surrounded by bright coronas of fire as the friction of their descent ignites the thickening air around them, burning away the top layers of their protective skins.

The wind catches some of them, blows them across oceans and over continents. See how they fall, these travelers, these seeds of something new! They drop out of the sky in fiery halos, and people make wishes on them, call them shooting stars, delight in their presence and their novelty. Astronomers make notes. Some of those astronomers will talk during the weeks to come about the rare and beautiful comet that died in their sky, and none of them will wonder what it carried in its belly.

The seeds fall, in ones and twos and dozens. Some of them drown in the deep oceans. Others land in inhospitable soil, in frozen tundra or burning volcanos. A few even fall on city streets, to be swept up as refuse or collected by curious children who will never recognize them for what they really are. So many opportunities, even now, for discovery, and one by one, they pass by untaken. No one questions the comet. No one slices open a seed found on a sidewalk. No one looks. No one *learns*.

One by one, they fall, and one of them falls in a green forest on a green continent. It lands in rich and fertile soil, still smoking with the heat of its long journey. No one sees it fall. No one comes to collect or quarantine it. Still, it sits fallow for a full turn of seasons, slowly adjusting to the weather, to the conditions around it.

A year after the comet died above the Earth, the first seeds crack their shells and send down thin, waxen roots, piercing deep into the ground beneath them. They begin to draw water and nutrients from their surroundings. They begin to *grow*. Inch by inch, cautious to the last, they begin to grow. Some sprout in sun and some in shadow. One grows in the heart of a desert, sending its roots spiraling deep in the quest for water.

Still they are not noticed. Still they are left alone.

At the end of a week, there is a sprout where each of the surviving seeds had been, their green skins underlaid with a thin sheen of blue, like the shimmer of a beetle's wings. Half the seedlings die before they pass this stage, swallowed by grazing animals which follow them into death a heartbeat later, collapsing into anaphylactic shock.

At the end of a month, each sprout has become a stalk, unfurling delicate, fernlike leaves covered in stinging hairs similar to a jellyfish's nematocysts. Another quarter of the seedlings die entering this stage, collapsing under their own weight as they fail to properly account for this new world's gravity.

At the end of a month, buds form atop the strengthening stalks, purple and white and red, streaked and gory. Each bud opens on the third day after its formation, turning a sightless eye toward the heavens, almost as if they can remember coming from those vaunted heights.

Silent, patient, hidden, the flowers wait.

They are very good at waiting.

## 3.

The seedpod isn't our only beginning: that doesn't suit the lifecycle we're chronicling here, which has many parts and many players. It also begins in a hospital, in a small town in Washington State, where a woman—call her Caroline; say that she is pretty and she is tired and she is trying very hard, even though she is very frightened—has just given birth to her daughter. See her now, sweat matting down her hair, tears on her cheeks, cradling the small, screaming creature she has made with her own body, fueled with her own blood. Is it any wonder she loves and fears it in equal measure, this tiny thing that can cause her so much pain and bring her so much joy at the same time?

The nurses take the baby away. Caroline, exhausted, uncertain, goes to sleep.

When she wakes, her parents—her frustrating, beloved, infuriating parents—are in the room. Her mother is holding the baby. Her father is sitting next to the bed, holding her hand. For the first time, Caroline is struck by how much he looks like she feels, how much parental love transcends generation and gender and even estrangement, even if she can't quite remember what made her decide she needed to do this on her own.

"Before you get mad, your sister called us," says her father. "She said that no-good boyfriend of yours ran out as soon as he heard you were in the family way."

"He didn't want to be a family with me, and good riddance," says Caroline. "I don't need him. I can be a family just fine on my own."

"Not entirely on your own," says her father, with a meaningful glance toward the tiny bundle still cradled in her mother's arms. "What are you going to name her?"

This feels like a test. That was part of what drove her away, she remembers that now: the way her father always seemed to be testing her, the way she could never be sure she had the right

answer. It wasn't comfortable. It wasn't *fair*. Caroline takes a breath.

"Anastasia," she says. "Like Grandma."

Now her mother looks up, surprised and pleased and smiling. "You're naming her after my mother?"

"I miss her," says Caroline, and that's the reason "away" could never quite be forever, could never come with changing her name or moving to another coast. Family is where you keep the pieces of yourself that need to be shared with someone else if they're going to have meaning, the memories that must be seen from three or four different angles at the same time before they find their context. She's been circling her parents since she left, never coming close enough to catch, never stepping far enough away to escape, because these are the people who remember where she comes from, who understand who she is when she's alone.

"I miss her too," says her mother, and then, "I miss *you*. We both do. I'm sorry we aren't always perfect together. Do you think we could try again, for your sake? For Anastasia?"

Caroline hesitates.

She's tired. She's tired of couches, and shitty little apartments with roaches in the walls, and motels that are as happy to rent by the hour as they are by the week. She doesn't mind the sex workers—they're sweet ladies, for the most part, and some of them have kids of their own; she's made her rent more than once by providing babysitting services to glamorous escorts in mended silk skirts and sky-high shoes—but the druggies, they're a problem. She doesn't want them around the baby. And how many couches are going to be open to her now that her daughter is out in the open, wailing and puking and messing her diapers, instead of peacefully tucked away inside her belly?

*I should have kept you inside forever, where you'd be safe*, she thinks, and she's righter than she will ever have the chance to know.

“It can’t be like it was,” she says. “Not this time. I’m a mother now. I have to be allowed to know what’s best for my little girl.”

“As long as you’ll let me help,” says her mother. Her father, who has no competition in sight for the position of most important man in Anastasia’s life, says nothing. This part of the conversation isn’t for him, and he’s a clever-enough man to know it, to understand that sometimes the right thing to do is stand back and hold his peace.

“I think I could use some help,” says Caroline, and holds out her arms, asking for her mother, asking for her daughter, asking for her family.

Renee Miller, who raised three children of her own, only to lose them all—one to a war, one to the other side of the country, and one, her precious baby girl, to her own stubbornness—walks her granddaughter across the room, and it’s like she’s coming home, and it’s like she never left.

Caroline takes Anastasia in her arms, and everything is perfect. Everything is just the way it’s supposed to be, forever.

#### 4.

The Millers live in a small town in Washington State, surrounded by trees on all sides, with the mountains misty in the distance, playing hide-and-seek with the shadows cast by clouds. It rains less often than people from out of state assume, more often than Caroline, cooped up in a three-bedroom house with an excitable toddler, would prefer.

Whenever the sun is shining—and sometimes when it’s not—Anastasia is outside, tearing around the yard, kicking her little wheeled scooter down the driveway, chasing the squirrels that cluster and chitter in the nearby trees. Their street doesn’t get much traffic, and they know all their neighbors; it’s as safe here as it could be anywhere. That’s enough to make up for the boredom, Caroline thinks. Her daughter is safe.

Anastasia has only three rules for playing outside. Don't go into the street; don't go down the sidewalk unless her mommy or one of her grandparents is in the yard to watch her; and don't go into the trees. The woods are very big and she is very small, and she would be lost very quickly if she strayed too far.

She doesn't *want* to go into the street. She saw one of the squirrels after it had gone into the street, and it was flat like a pancake, or like one of the paper dolls her grandma cuts out for her. Only it wasn't a paper doll, and it wasn't a pancake, it was D-E-A-D, dead, and it was never going to chitter at her from the trees ever again. She doesn't want to be flat and quiet forever, so she doesn't want to go into the street.

She doesn't *want* to go down the sidewalk when there's no one to see her. She has a feeling, vague and unfounded but solid enough to haunt her dreams, that sometimes people go down the sidewalk and they don't come back. All the other kids she knows have mommies *and* daddies. They aren't always in the same combination—Shawna has two mommies, and Mark has two daddies—and they aren't always around—Alison's mommy drives a big truck, and she's gone for weeks sometimes—but they exist. No one ever talks about her daddy, or says where he is, but sometimes her mommy looks at the sidewalk with a great big sadness in her eyes, like everything is wrong. Anastasia's daddy must have gone out when no one could see, and he couldn't find his way back to home. She doesn't want to get lost forever, so she doesn't want to go down the sidewalk.

But the trees . . .

The trees are where the squirrels live, and the deer, and the big old owl that goes who-who, who-who at night outside her window. She saw it once, all feathers and silence, flying across the yard like a dream, and she wanted to go with it, with the owl, off into forever. Going into the woods isn't like going into the street, and it isn't like going down the sidewalk when there's no one to

see you. Going into the woods is going to see the owl. It's going to dance with the deer. It's all good things, and no bad things at all.

Anastasia is three and a half years old, and she wants the woods like her lungs want air. She wants the woods so badly that some nights all she can dream about is what it must be like, out there in the trees, surrounded by rough brown trunks and soft green needles, with the sound of owls all around her.

Her mother knows she wants the woods, and most days, Caroline watches her like a hawk, ready to swoop in and carry her back to safety. But this day is different. This day, her mother is on the phone in the kitchen, distracted, saying things Anastasia doesn't understand and doesn't really care about. This day, her mother isn't watching. Anastasia takes a few steps toward the edge of the wood and pauses to look back, gauging her mother's distraction. All she can see through the kitchen window is the back of her mother's head, brown-blond hair tangled carelessly, like she hasn't even bothered brushing it yet this morning.

Anastasia turns and runs, not aware that she will never see her mother again. She is consumed by her wanting for the woods, running as fast as her legs will carry her, and she imagines she's faster than the wind, faster than the owl with its great brown wings, faster than anything has ever been or will ever be. She is a child racing toward the end of her own life. She is the only thing that has ever mattered, or ever will matter. She is a universe unto herself, and up until this moment she has been expanding, stretching toward infinity.

Her legs carry her past the edge of the trees, past the twilight zone of underbrush and fallen branches where she has played before, under the careful supervision of an adult, and into the woods proper. She stops, stunned, looking around herself with open-mouthed wonder.

Sunlight pierces the air, refined into tight golden shafts by the interplay of shade and open space. The ground isn't only ferns; it's

mushrooms and fallen logs and everything a fairy tale forest *ought* to be. She feels like she's walking into one of her picture books, and she doesn't think about how she's getting farther away from home with every step she takes, or how her mother may be worried about her. She only wants to see what's past the next tree, what's over the next little rise in the ground. She only wants to find the owl.

She thinks she could be happy never going into the woods again, never doing anything forbidden ever again, if only she could see the owl.

So she walks, and she walks, and home dwindles behind her, forgotten, forsaken, until something bigger than she is rustles in the brush to her left, and she jumps, startled, and realizes she has no idea where she is.

Anastasia is three and a half years old, which feels very grown-up and mature when she's explaining to her grandfather how she absolutely deserves extra ice cream, and which suddenly feels very small and very young and very alone.

"Mama?" she says.

The woods answer with the rustle of branches and the call of small, distant birds.

"Mama!"

Not once in Anastasia's life before now has a sincere cry for help gone unanswered. But this time is different. This time, she has wandered past the edges of what is allowed. She has gone too far to be heard.

Crying now, Anastasia starts to run. She isn't the fastest thing in the world anymore. She's the lostest, and all she wants is to be found. She's also running the wrong way. She runs and runs until her foot finds a shallow root, and then she's tripping, she's falling, she's rolling down a hill, and there's mud in her hair and moss in her mouth and she wants . . . she wants . . .

"I wanna go *home!*" she wails, sitting up and drumming her heels against the ground.

She smells something.

It smells like . . . like popcorn and cookies and grass that's just been cut and watermelon and sugar candy. It smells like all the good things in the whole world, all jumbled up together. She sniffles, tears stopping, and thinks about candy houses in the middle of the wood, the kind with gingerbread walls and sweet frosting eaves. She doesn't think about witches, or the kind of things that might use a candy house as a lure. She's still too young to take the dark messages from the fairy tales she listens to at bedtime, and all she's thinking of is candy.

Anastasia gets to her feet and starts following the smell. She's more cautious now that she's fallen, now that she has scrapes on her knees and on the palms of her hands. They sting and ache and bleed, but they're not as important as the possibility of candy.

She comes around a corner. There's no candy house, and she's briefly disappointed, but then she sees what *is* there, and she stops, eyes going wide with awe and delight.

It's like a flower, if flowers were made entirely out of dragonfly wings. The insectile petals glitter in the sunlight, breaking it up into little rainbows. If she were older, she would call them "prismatic," but she's not older, and so all she thinks is "pretty" as she walks toward the flower, eyes still very wide.

If she were older, she might be wary of something that doesn't look like anything else she's seen since she stepped into the trees, of the way the curling vines around the base of the thick, fleshy stalk that supports the massive bloom—it's almost as wide across as she is tall, and the stem is thicker than her arm—seem to twitch in anticipation as she approaches. But she's not older. She's just a lost little girl looking at the most beautiful thing she's ever seen and wanting to possess it with all of her half-formed magpie heart.

All the good smells are coming from this flower. She knows it, even though it's impossible, as impossible as the flower itself. It is miracle and living rainbow and candy house, all rolled into

one, and she keeps getting closer, and the vines keep twitching, and this is inevitable. This has *been* inevitable for thirty years, since her grandparents bought the house on the edge of the woods, since the comet with a heart made of alien seeds turned its sightless eye toward the distant blue shadow of the Earth. Everything she has done in her short life has led her here, away from safety, away from the life she might have lived, away from home.

Look away, if you must. What comes next is part of the story, but it is not as important to witness it as it is to know that it has happened: that it was inevitable. That it could not be run from, or avoided, or escaped.

Anastasia climbs onto a fallen branch, adding a few more precious inches to her height. Even so, she has to strain to touch the tips of her fingers to the center of the flower, which is hard and bumpy and feels like the gravel-rich dirt that forms along the edges of the sidewalk. The bumps are regular, and if she were older, she would associate the feeling with sunflowers, the way they push their seeds up against the surface.

The dragonfly wing petals vibrate, tapping against each other in silent staccato. The bumpy center seems to pulse, growing warm under Anastasia's fingers. The vines twitch and tangle, drawing closer, drawing tighter together. Suddenly, and without warning, she is afraid, her deeply buried animal instincts rising up to protect what's already past protecting. She tries to pull her hand away.

The flower holds her fast.

There is no sensation of stickiness, but her fingers refuse to budge from the surface all the same: it's as if she has become bonded to it, glued down so suddenly that there was never any chance to break the seal. She takes a step backward, and drops abruptly as the log rolls out from under her feet. Even that isn't enough to sever the connection between fingers and flower, only

to wrench her arm from its socket, leaving her dangling and terrified and in pain. She opens her mouth to scream.

She never sees the vine begin to move, not until it slithers tight around her face and neck, cutting off her air, cutting off the sound before it starts. The rest of the vines are close behind, binding her, cocooning her, until all that remains is a tangled knot of vegetation, bucking wildly as she struggles.

Inside the vegetable cocoon, thorns as fine as threads are pushing out of the vines, piercing her skin, slithering into the meat of her. They begin pale as bone and quickly brighten to a deep, arterial red as they drink and drain, drowning themselves in blood.

Bit by bit, the struggle stops.

Bit by bit, the heart of Anastasia Miller stops with it.

## 5.

Caroline hangs up the phone harder than strictly necessary, taking some satisfaction from the act of slamming it down into the cradle. Then she picks it up and slams it again, wishing she could hang up more than once.

“Asshole,” she mutters before looking around guiltily. Little pitchers have big ears, after all. But there’s no sign of Anastasia: her transgression has gone unwitnessed. Normally, she would be concerned. Right now, she’s just relieved. Ana didn’t need to hear that. Ana didn’t need to hear *any* of that.

Where does he get off? Alan walked out on *them* when he heard she was pregnant, not the other way around. Alan said he didn’t want to be a father, that he had *never* wanted to be a father, and he never *would* want to be a father. Now he’s hunting her down and demanding to be a part of his daughter’s life? Now he’s acting like he has a say in where she lives, what she does, how she raises Anastasia? No. It doesn’t work that way. Once you run out, you don’t get to swagger back in like the running was nothing. You just don’t.

You don't.

Slowly, her chest unclenches and the blood rushing in her ears quiets. The courts will find for her, if it even gets that far—which it won't. There's no way Alan will actually press the issue, not once he realizes she's not simply going to roll over and show him her throat. He only likes things when they're easy. For whatever reason, he thinks walking in and becoming a father to a three-year-old girl he's never so much as seen before will be easy. Well, it won't, and neither will she.

The thought of Anastasia makes her realize, all too abruptly, how quiet it is in the house. The air has the particular stillness that means she's alone, which isn't right. Heart sinking, she tries to remember whether she heard the front door close while she was on the phone with her ex. She did, didn't she?

Well, that's all right. Anastasia is allowed to play in the yard, as long as she stays on the grass and in view of the windows. Everything is fine. She's sure that everything is fine. She rushes to the window. She looks out.

There is no little girl on the lawn.

Caroline's heart sinks deeper, a rock dropping through her chest. She forces her steps to stay light as she walks to the door, opens it, and steps onto the porch. As long as she doesn't panic—as long as she doesn't lose her cool—nothing will be really wrong. As long as she doesn't admit the possibility of true crisis, everything will be fine.

*She's there*, she thinks, and the words are half to reassure herself and half a plea to a distant and possibly imaginary God. She's aware that bargaining with the divine is a bad habit to fall into, but she doesn't see another option. She lost focus. She got distracted. She didn't pay attention. She did all the things she's not allowed to do, all the things that would make her a bad mother, and now . . . and now . . .

For just a moment, when she opens the front door, she sees Anastasia sitting on the lawn, playing some complicated and

incomprehensible game with her eternally expanding stable of plastic horses. For just a moment, she can see the sunlight shining off her daughter's hair, hear the soft mutter of instructions conveyed to imaginary equines, and everything is going to be okay, everything is going to be *fine*. For just a moment.

Then the moment breaks, and the sunlight is shining down on nothing but empty grass. The horses are there, a few of them, but they lie discarded, not held tight in loving hands. There is no sign of Anastasia. No sign at all.

Caroline is very quiet, and very still, like she's waiting for God to realize that this is wrong; like she's waiting for God to take it back. God does no such thing.

Caroline begins to scream.

Within the hour, everyone on the street is out and searching for the missing child. Every house has been checked, every duvet pulled back and every cupboard opened. Anastasia is not in any yard, not watching television in any babysitter's living room, not asleep in any bed. Anastasia is *gone*.

Within two hours, the street is crawling with police. Search parties, hastily assembled around powerful flashlights, have begun combing the woods. They call Anastasia's name, over and over again, until the crows roosting in the trees take off, startled into frenzied motion.

And Anastasia is gone.

Some of the searchers come within feet of the green bundle deep in the trees, but they take no notice of it. There is no enticing smell, and the flower—the bright, impossible, obviously alien flower—has closed its petals as the plant it grew from devotes all its energy to the task of germination. The inevitable has happened. What comes after might still be avoided . . .

But they do not notice, do not see. They scream the name of a little girl and walk past her resting place at the same time.

The search continues, and Anastasia is gone.

## 6.

Three days. That is the amount of time required to drain a body dry, to render it as frail as a cicada's discarded exoskeleton or an empty seedpod. When the tendrils of the green, green vines finally unwind from their prize, what they drop to the forest floor bears no more resemblance to a human child than it does to a lizard's shed skin. It is already crumbling, falling apart, dissolving into the dust that birthed it.

Anastasia's clothing remains surprisingly intact, torn in a few small places, stained in a few more, but not even as dirty as it should be after three days in the depths of the wood. The impossible flower has collapsed inward on itself, dying, drying up, until no one but the canniest of botanists would be able to tell that it doesn't belong here. The stalk, meanwhile, has thickened, grown gravid with the great seed that is its life's work and purpose on this world.

The seed pulses ripely, almost obscene in its vitality. It pulses again, and then it splits, green giving way to membranous gold and finally to the pale pink of a child's skin, the cornsilk pallor of a child's hair. Anastasia Miller—but not Anastasia Miller, no, Anastasia Miller is dead and gone and lost forever—tumbles into the watery sunlight that filters through the trees, naked, as are all things at the moment of their birth. She blinks at the brightness of it all, and she at once recognizes the light and knows she has never seen it before. Everything is familiar. Everything is new.

Carefully, remembering without really knowing how, Anastasia stands. Her knees, new-formed and unsteady, wobble. She spreads her arms to steady herself. The wind blows around her, and her skin prickles in response to the chill. Her clothes, discarded on the ground, are suddenly tempting. She picks them up, one piece at a time, and puts them back on. Only then does she look back at the plant that is her parent and was her prison.

It is dying. The stalk, burst by her emergence, is withering into brown mush. The dragonfly petals have fallen from the flower's

face and lie scattered amongst the withering vines. There is no going back. Only forward; only out.

She picks up a petal, admiring the prismatic beauty of it for a moment before it crumbles into dust between her fingers. For a moment, she feels obscurely sad, like something has been lost forever. Then she turns, suddenly sure of which way is home, and begins to walk.

Three days and six hours after Anastasia Miller disappeared into the woods, something that looks just like her walks back out.

Anastasia's mother has been weeping all that time, stopping only when drugged into a light and useless daze. She is weeping when the little girl walks across the lawn, reaches for the doorknob, and lets herself inside. The sound of the door swinging shut shocks her out of her tears. Her parents—Anastasia's grandparents—are supposed to be at the police station, following up on a possible lead. Alan, her ex, has been brought in for questioning. Every avenue is being explored. No one should be opening that door.

The little girl steps into the doorway. Caroline's heart lurches in her chest, almost returning to its place between her lungs, protected by the birdcage of her ribs. She's halfway on her feet before she registers the intent to move, stumbling toward the little girl, toward *her* little girl, toward hope, toward salvation.

"Anastasia," she breathes.

"No," says the child, because she isn't, because she's too fresh off the tree to understand the need for subtlety. That will come much later, if it comes at all. "The aliens came and took your real baby. They left me. I'm sorry."

The only words she has for this world are the ones harvested from the real Anastasia Miller. The only vocabulary she can use is the one she's stolen. Learning the rest of the patterns of this planet will take longer, assuming she's allowed the time. So many invasions fail right here, with defenseless seedlings meeting

the species they have come to study, being recognized, being destroyed.

Caroline barks laughter through her tears as she drops to her knees and takes the child who is not her daughter into her arms.

“You be an alien if you want to, baby,” she says. “As long as you come home.”

The police will comb the woods again, this time looking for a kidnapper, someone who would steal a little girl only to return her, disoriented but unharmed, to her home.

Anastasia’s kidnapper does not exist, and will never be found. Neither will Anastasia.

7.

This was a story. It can’t hurt you anymore.

But you needed to understand before I could tell you what happened after.