

I knew it would be the last time I saw her for months, maybe even a full year, so I clinked my soda can against hers and said “Cheers” like we’d never alter the world again.

“Cheers,” she echoed, leaning back in my kitchen chair, so far she could fall. But never far enough.

I drank half the soda in one swig, orange fizz and bubbles burning my throat. She made the six years since high school feel like nothing, as if it was only yesterday that we’d made the universe bend to our design.

Anything had felt possible then - anything had *been* possible. But she was going to college and I was staying here, and our story was over before it ever began.

We’d never gone far enough, and now we never would.

“The real world doesn’t deserve you, Dell,” I said instead. I couldn’t lie.

She turned up her gold-painted lips in a smile. “That’s why it needs me.”

It would be selfish to ask her to stay for me. I knew this, and if/when I asked, I wouldn’t be the reason for it.

“The world could use you too,” Della added. “You won’t come with me, Col?”

I shook my head, bringing the soda can back to my mouth. “If I didn’t go with my mom to England, why would I go to Haverford with you?”

It worked. The tension broke, and she grinned at me again. “Of course. My mistake.” She spun her gaze around the kitchen, empty and hardly used. “So you have free reign of the place until the fall?”

“Almost free,” I clarified. “Just me and Sasha.”

“Oh. Right.” Della’s mouth twisted in pity. As if that was even worse, for me to not even be living alone, but still with my little sister. It was better, at least, than my mom’s reaction when I told her I wasn’t looking at colleges.

She’d been so disappointed in me. There’s nothing to be proud of when your daughter graduates high school at sixteen but stays locked up at home as she approaches her

twenty-third birthday. She'd given up trying to convince me to do anything else than what I was born to do, and I was relieved she'd taken my suggestion to visit her college friends in Bristol for the summer and fall. She could find work freelancing across the ocean just as well as here.

My mom, Della - everyone was drifting away from me.

With Della's focus on the kitchen, I let my eyes linger on her. She was so much older than she'd been when we'd first started exploring, but her prettiness had matured into true beauty. The bright lipsticks had given way to elegant makeup, and the coiled hair that had once seemed so unruly was now a perfectly styled afro.

"There shouldn't be mosquitos out now," I heard myself say. "Let's get some fresh air."

"Truly?" Della laughed. "I thought I was the one who said that to you."

I shrugged, standing at the same time she did. "Maybe I've changed."

It was an obvious lie, but neither of us acknowledged it. With our soda cans left on the kitchen table, I slid open the screen door and led her out into the night.

I kicked my legs over the railing of the porch, my skirt catching the air. Della pulled herself up beside me. Only the dim light hanging by the back door illuminated us, but it lit up the college name printed across Della's tight tank top. I found myself staring again, caught by the smooth skin of her stomach and arms and neck.

Any worry Della had over me in the kitchen was hidden now. "Dare I ask you why you changed the hair again?" She gestured to my head with a flick of her hand. "Is it the same reason as high school?"

I ran a hand through my short, tight curls, shrugging. "You don't like it?"

Della scoffed. "Shut up. You know you always look gorgeous, Col."

My cheeks burned, even though I knew I was nothing to look at next to her. Everything about me, visually, was *less* than Della. My skin was less dark, my eyes were less expressive, and my hair, even when it was grown out, wasn't nearly as large as hers.

“It’s been a while since then, hasn’t it?” Della mused, her fingernails tapping the railing. “I remember when you had your hair like that all the time. You started growing it out a couple of years ago, didn’t you? When Lanying - ”

I flinched at the name, and Della cut herself short. I could tell she hadn’t meant to drag up memories of our old team. “Sorry, Col,” Della murmured. We sat in silence for a moment before she sighed. “Still can’t believe we’re all that’s left of the Cube Crew.”

A team, a club, a sisterhood. For some of us it had been a safe haven, for others a treasure trove. For me, it had been -

Everything.

I used to feel so clumsy, so loud whenever I was at Della’s side. She was always delicate, pretty, bright. I was the larger one, the heavier one, the one who took up too much space.

Once we discovered coding, none of that mattered anymore. The six of us became unstoppable.

*Six sides to a cube*, we used to say. Six parts.

It was when we became five that we stopped searching.

Well, some of us did.

Della cast her eyes my way. I’d been well aware that she’d know the truth the moment she saw my hair. “You’re still exploring, aren’t you?”

I shrugged, but there was no point denying it. “You’re not?”

“It was fun in high school. I get that, Col, I do. But at some point, don’t we have to stop focusing on a world that isn’t ours? Shouldn’t we live in a world we can fix?”

“You don’t know we can’t fix it from there,” I shot back. “We tried, didn’t we?”

Despite her annoyance, Della’s lips curved up in a smile. “I remember. God, Col, you - you were reckless.”

I laughed, shoving her shoulder. “You were there, too!”

She was there with me in the computer lab, finding the codes that would cause the auditorium to go dark, the principal's emails to be played on the main projector, the football team's opening music to be Vivaldi's Winter. Then, we kept going. There were strings that would make the algebra teacher, Ms. Jefferies, unable to say words starting with the letter s. Or force the cafeteria to sell only strawberry milk every other Tuesday. Or change the school mascot from a foam fox into an *actual* one in the middle of cheerleading events.

Nothing had ever stuck, but that had made it all the more tantalizing. Our best record had been making the SATs show only Disney lyrics in the multiple choice bubbles for two hours and twenty-five minutes. It had worn off at that point, and Della and I had to race to finish in time, but she got 1200 and I got 1350.

Her dreams had led her to an art school, and mine had led me here.

"So you're still using oil paints? Or is it watercolors now?"

Della paused before she answered, and I took that as a sign that she was as caught in the memories as I was. "Neither. I'm working with clay."

"Sculpting?" That was a surprise. "But you always liked paints."

"That was before." Della tilted her head slightly to her left, her voluminous curls brushing my cheek. I shifted closer automatically. "After high school - it's hard to find something that makes you feel that way, you know? It got too frustrating when I kept telling myself '*It's okay, if you mess up you can just undo it.*' Because that's not how the real world works."

"You could've kept trying," I argued, but Della shook her head, jaw set. "Col, this is why I stopped. If I'd kept trying to rewire the world, make it do exactly what I wanted all the time - even you should be able to see there's no art in that."

I jerked back, clenching the porch railing. "Are you saying that literally or figuratively, Dell?"

"Col." Della rolled her eyes. "I'm not calling you - us - untalented, okay? But shouldn't there be a point where we stop chasing this? Don't you want to keep moving?"

"I am."

I tried to make my voice steady, but Della groaned aloud and threw her head back. “You mean you’ve been digging deeper since high school.”

“They keep so much from us!” I closed the distance between us, pressing her bare shoulder against my T-shirt, her jean shorts against my long skirt, her sandal against my mismatched sock. “*Think* about it, Dell. Really think about it. If this was so dangerous, wouldn’t they have outlawed coding altogether? Instead, we learned about this together - and no one stopped us. Don’t you want to see how deep it all goes?”

When Della turned to face me, she was so close that I could count the glitter particles on her eyelids, hear the gold hoops of her earrings clinking against her neck, feel her breath on my lips.

She smiled gently. That smile had made me go even further in our coding, pushing me to see where our limits were. It was the smile that had made me go weak in the knees even before I typed our first string of commands.

“Do you remember the treehouse in 8th grade? In the playground?”

Had I forgotten how tender her voice could be? I just nodded. “When you - you told me you thought you liked girls.”

“But I said I wasn’t sure.” Della’s nose bumped mine. “And you said I could just kiss you and find out.”

“I remember.” I tried to swallow, but it was hard to even breathe with Della looking at me like that. “Did you - did you ever find out?” Neither of us had been interested in dating after we’d entered high school. Once you started typing, it was impossible to go back. Except, Della had.

“I did.” Della was still smiling. “What about you?”

If I had once turned the vice principal’s varsity jacket into a bearskin, I could manage to speak above a whisper now. I leaned forward. “Would you help me find out?”

I could feel Della’s smile on my lips as I kissed her, and I brought up one hand to cup her face. She hummed slightly, wrapping her fingers around mine on the railing. How had I ever forgotten how *soft* she was? Had she always tasted like orange soda, sweet and sparkling?

Della was the one to pull back, her acrylics lightly scraping my cheek. The stars lit up her eyes, the gentle night breeze causing goosebumps to dance up her arms -

“Didn’t that feel real?” Della whispered.

I wanted to tear myself away from her, jump up and tell her that it wasn’t my fault if she gave up on the universe. But with her still sitting so close, the memory of her kiss still lingering on my mouth, I just sank forward and nestled my head into the space between her neck and shoulder. “Why don’t you understand, Dell?”

Della released my hand to rub warmth up and down my arm, pulling me against her. “It’s not our world, Col. This one is. Shouldn’t that be our focus? We could keep sculpting; we just have to use clay instead of - ”

“Instead of code,” I mumbled. I felt Della press her head on top of mine, covering my short hair in her curls.

“You should want more. If you come with me, Col, we can make beautiful things - ”

“But it’s not the same. Not even close.”

I could feel the moment Della gave up, her sigh escaping into the night. It wasn’t that I was letting her go; it was that I was holding onto the one skill I had that was worth a damn. Turning away was impossible for me now.

But maybe not for her.

I reluctantly disentangled myself from Della, jumping the short distance from the porch railing to the dying grass. “Can I show you something before you go?”

“If you insist.” She took my offered hand, landly lightly on the ground. I didn’t release her fingers as I led her inside, through the kitchen and living room, to the tucked-away office I had been working in while she’d been at college.

Della sucked in a breath as we stepped through the door. I’d pulled heavy curtains over the floor-to-ceiling windows, but the various computer monitors on the large desk were flashing with light. I’d left my notebooks scattered around the room, more messily than I’d initially thought, pages and pages filled with scribbled numbers and half-finished phrases.

“You weren’t kidding, were you?” Della dropped my hand as she entered, leaning in close to the flickering screen of one of my laptops. The green and white displays lit up her features like a wizard. “You’re really back into this.”

“And I’m so close to unlocking the motherlode, Dell.” I gestured to the central computer, the focus of my efforts. “If I can break through this firewall, we’ll have opportunities like never before. Think about it - we can do so much more than just changing the color of Mr. Thompson’s hair.”

Our edits had been confined to the school grounds. But *this* - oh, this was everything. Could be everything. Would be everything.

That made Della look away from the strings of code, doubt in her eyes. “Col - it isn’t safe to go this far.”

“It would just be giving us the possibility to keep going. Look, Dell, please.” I picked up the leftmost laptop. “It’s not easy to break into, obviously. But I know how. I just need your help.”

Della did a double-take, looking between the computers and me. She made an incredulous sound. “No, Col - I told you, I’m not doing this anymore.”

So she claimed, but I could see her pupils dilate as she took in the magnitude of what I was showing her.

“Just help me break through this firewall. This one, and only this one. Then I’ll never ask anything of you ever again.” I could live without Della’s touches. Without her smiles, her jokes, her kisses. All I needed was the possibility to transform the world.

I knew it wasn’t just for me when she sighed and grabbed the laptop from my hands. “I’m going to regret this,” she muttered, taking her seat at the desk. There was only one chair, but I’d always been most comfortable on the floor, looking up and knowing I wasn’t alone in my work.

“What are we doing?” Della asked as I settled down against a full and useless bookcase. I activated the sensors on my tablet. “I’ve been studying this firewall for weeks. I think that we need to attack it at the same time, but use different methods.”

Della mumbled another argument, but she went to work just as quickly as I did. The tapping filling the space between us felt more intimate than any physical touch.

I'd never trusted anyone outside of the Cube Crew to help me, for obvious reasons, and we hadn't been a team since high school. But even though Della hadn't touched a line of code in over three years, I knew I'd have no cause to doubt her now.

When we shattered those defenses, flooding our screens with a seemingly never-ending scroll of commands, I didn't even examine it. I threw my head up to watch Della's reaction, savoring the way her golden lips parted, lips covered in the same lipstick I knew was smudged on my own mouth.

"Oh," Della breathed, her eyes widening in delight, and I knew that I had her back.