

"Stars"

Rachel Kellis

Stars.

They stare at him, giving off their light like tiny beacons of hope in a sea of restlessness and unease. He wants to be like them, shining in the heavens, looking down on the souls of this earth.

Behind him, his caregiver works. She tightens the knobs and bolts of his machinery, the wrench sounding against him like music.

"Stars," he says, leaning back slightly. "Just exploding balls of hydrogen and helium. Created by nature and explainable by science."

They shine above him and as they do so he feels like they are mocking him as they twinkle in time to the turnings of the wrench.

"It makes you feel like the complete opposite, doesn't it?" she says, throwing the wrench to the dry grass, and grabbing a pair of pliers. The wrench makes a soft clanging noise against the ground. "You, created by science and unexplainable by nature. Don't move, the wires back here are a mess."

He stays still, listening to the night sounds around him, the cars on the freeway a mile away, the sound of the waves against the beach behind them.

The sound of his motorized heart beating.

"Why do the stars shine, Karina?"

"But you just explained it--"

"No, no. I just explained what they're made of. Tell me why they shine."

She stops tinkering with him for a moment. He can nearly hear the cogs in her brain turning and clinking together. "Well," she says slowly, resuming her work. He can feel her fingers on the wires, tugging and twisting until she pulls

out the one connecting his nerves. "I guess that when the hydrogen and helium combine, it creates light. I don't really know. Sorry, Kavi."

Kavi mulls over her answer and she reconnects his nerves.

"I heard," he says slowly. "That when people die, they become stars. That the better that they were in life, the bigger and brighter they shone."

She looks up from the mess of wire and metal and glances at the back of his head.

He is still looking up at the stars.

"When I die, will I become a star, Karina?"

She drops the pliers now. They land next to the wrench on the brown grass. Her hand moves to the pockets of her shorts until she finds a small plastic baggie full of screws. Her other hand glides around the ground around her, searching for something.

She finds the flesh colored metal plate and holds it to his neck, covering the wires, his secrets.

"I wish I could tell you, Kavi. But I don't know."

He ducks his head now. The sudden movement jars her, and one of the screws flies out of her hands. Her fingers search desperately for it.

"It's right behind me," he says quietly. "Two inches in front of you, and five inches to your right."

She finds the screw, and continues putting him back together.

"I think you'll be a star," he whispers to the grass. "You'll shine brighter than the rest of them, Karina."

The stars above her and the outline of Kavi's body blur into the surroundings. She feels for the last hole, and puts in the last screw.

She covers the square with her hands.

The feeling of his skin against hers. It feels so real.

"It's only synthetic fabric." The words come so quietly she can barely hear them.

She doesn't know what to say. She peers around to look at his face.

He looks back up at the sky.

"There's no such thing as a synthetic star."

She pulls her hands away, and fumbles for her tools. She picks them up, her slender fingers wrapping around the handles. She slides them into a bag lying behind her.

She crawls on her hands and knees around Kavi and sits in front of him.

She reaches in front of her, and her fingertips grasp his chin, raising it up so that his eyes will meet hers.

His eyes. She can see stars reflected in them.

"I won't, he says. "I won't be a star. Sooner or later, my machinery will fall apart. My memory chip will malfunction and my voice program will fail. I won't be any use anymore and they'll throw me in the junk heap. I'll crumble into nothing. I'll lie broken and forgotten and I won't shine."

He wants to cry. But crying is a human action.

"They don't think when they make us, the mechanics and the scientists and the computer programmers." he continues. "They work hard and stay up late and forget about cold dinners at home with their wives, only so that they can make us real. Human.

"They do too good of a job. They install a chip that analyzes our situations, and gives us proper emotions. 'To blend in better'. They don't realize. Yes, we can laugh, be happy. Be sad. We get alerted if we go too long without food, so that we can and convert it into energy."

He draws his knees up to his chest and clutches them. "But we think, too. We want. It doesn't matter how many fancy

gadgets they give us, no matter how many programs they install. We're still not human. We're still not *real*."

He buries his head against his legs and wants to cry. But even if he did, would it be genuine?

Karina sits silent.

"I want to be real," he says a moment later, his voice muffled against his jeans. "I want to shine too."

She blinks furiously, wiping her fists across her eyes.

The brown grass crinkles as she moves closer to him, and wraps her arms around his frame.

"Oh, Kavi." She says, her voice thick. "You have no idea, no clue, that you're so much more real and alive than any of them out there. You'll shine. I promise. You'll shine brightest of them all."

Above them the stars shine, and one by one, slowly fade away. And in the darkest hour before the dawn, they pretend they believe her lie.