

Outside a glass studio in Brooklyn, a red neon light flickered to life in the twilight, illuminating a No Parking sign, one of the thousands New York City has to offer. Inside the building, Astra Sideris made her best attempt to rein in a curse word. And failed.

Sweat dappled her temples, pasting wisps of hair across her forehead. She tried not to think of all her other areas slick with sweat as she spun the iron punty rod, maintaining a steady pace. Within the inferno of the glory hole, the glass glowed amongst the flames. When it mostly lost its firmness, going soft around the edges, Astra pulled the blob from the fire and circled to meet her sister.

"I told you not to wear that sweater." Leena held a punty low in her hands, ready for Astra to press the dollop of glass to her post. Once the glass was properly sandwiched between the two rods, they began to pull apart, stretching the glass like taffy. Leena raised her eyes, scrutinizing Astra's flushed face and her choice in attire.

They continued to put space between them, carefully moving back. The luminous strand of glass dimmed to a dull brown as it stretched over small wooden ladders placed along the concrete floor. Once Astra retreated as far as she could go without wandering into the street, she gave a nod to Leena. In unison, they knelt down. Leena pulled a pair of sheers from the metal cart beside her and Astra grabbed the pair dangling from the leather belt around her hips. The glass seemed to sigh, letting out a small clink as the strand was cut free at both ends.

"It's September, Leena. How could I resist this?" Astra stood, hands outstretched, modeling her knit sweater with five cross-stitched ghosts swaying along the neckline.

"You realize it's still summer, right?" Leena sat cross-legged on the floor, motioning to her own outfit. It was a variation of the clothes she wore every day. A black sports bra and matching tights. Her dark hair pulled back tight into a high bun. Always ready to run.

Commented [CS1]: I'm not sure what this has to do with the submission? It's kind of cool grounding and a cool image, but what does it promise about what is to come?

If it's *only* grounding detail, it might be a little specific, though that's probably just me being super picky. I'll ask the group what they think.

Commented [CS2]: This, to me, says that Astra is less experienced.

Or that her sister is a know-it-all I told you so sibling.

Commented [CS3]: So we're in an omniscient POV? We start outside the store, and now we're getting thoughts and details from both characters in the room. It's been consistent so far, so good work.

Commented [CS4]: Huh. This says that Astra's the one who has experience here.

Commented [CS5]: fun

Commented [CS6]: interesting characterization.

“Autumn is a state of mind, dear sister,” Astra said with a smirk before slinking off the sweater in favor of her tank top beneath, black with a white skeletal rib cage embellished on the front. “You’re right, though, *as always*. The sweater wasn’t the best choice for the shop.”

“You can say that again.” With an apron of tools rolled under one arm and a jug of water sloshing in the other, their mother came in from the backroom. “We have work to do, and I don’t need anyone fainting this time. Understood?” she said with a playful glance over her shoulder.

Trailing in behind her, Cass, their youngest sibling by approximately eight minutes, held a box weighed down by color. Piled high were bars and bags of frit, ground up bits of glass every color of the rainbow.

Commented [CS7]: Triplets?

“That was one time,” Cass said, setting the box of colors on the concrete beside one of the workstations. “And I was six.”

In the glow of the shop, their mother ran a hand through Cass’s hair with affection then clipped back her own dark strands, ready to get to work.

For the next few hours, they fell into time. Astra and Leena came together and apart, stretching the liquid glass between them until long strands of it lay in a pile at their feet like threads waiting to be woven into a tapestry.

Out of the corner of her eye, Astra watched her mother. With strong hands and sure movements, she dipped the end of the blowpipe she held into the furnace. Glowing molten glass gathered on the tip. She blew a quick breath into the hollow pipe, expanding the glass, bringing it to life. A thousand times or more, Astra was witness to these same motions but she never grew tired of it. The awe that swelled in her stomach, that caused her skin to prickle and the hair on her arms to stand on end, it always came back anew each time she watched her mother work.

Soon her mother settled into her seat at the bench, shaping the glass into what it would become. Cass took over blowing those life-giving breaths into the piece at their mother's command. Some were soft and quick, others with more strength, forcing the glass to slowly swell like a pregnant belly.

At her side, Leena bumped her hip against Astra's, pulling her out of the trance. A wordless way of telling her to get back to work. With a roll of her eyes, she took her seat at one of the workstations, smoothing her palms against the cool metal and began cutting the long strands of glass they pulled earlier into shorter, more manageable lengths.

She didn't have to look anyway. With ease, Astra could picture the scene playing out behind her. Reheat, blow, shape. Repeat. It went on that way, the dance of fire and breath and glass until their mother called them around, the need for everyone's hands near.

In a swift motion, Cass moved to the bench, rotating the blowpipe, while their mother worked the torch, weakening the connection between the pipe and the glass sphere. When the glass seemed to sway around the constriction point, their mother waved a hand, motioning for Astra and Leena.

She'd always held her breath for this part. Grabbing the face shield from its hook on the wall, Astra fastened it on and slid a pair of kevlar gloves up to her elbows. Crouching below the glass, she held her arms outstretched, ready to cradle the fragile globe. At their mother's side, Leena dipped the file she held into a vessel of water.

"Carefully," their mother instructed as Leena scored the glass, the water causing tiny fractures to spread between the pipe and the weighty orb. With three swift taps, the glass broke free into Astra's awaiting arms and relief flooded through her chest like it always did. Brushing

Commented [CS8]: Lots of pregnancy/lifegiving thematic imagery here. Is that setting the tone for the rest of the story?

past her, Cass swiveled around Astra to the annealer, opening the door for her and closing it once the globe was secure inside.

As soon as the door clicked shut, Astra lifted the face shield and blew out a breath. As she slumped back against the annealer, she took in the pleased expression on her mother's face. "How many more days until your show, Mom?" Astra grinned already knowing the answer. They all did.

Astra's first memories were made of glass. Leena's first footsteps, in a gallery. And their mother swore, against everyone's protests, that Cass's first word had been *crucible*.

This wasn't their mother's first exhibition. She's had residencies all across the country. *Ten to be exact*, Astra recalled, trying to ignore the pinpricks of frustration that always accompanied those memories.

Still, everything about this show was different. Bigger. The entire space, every blank wall and empty pedestal, was for her work alone. A week-long solo exhibition in the most prestigious gallery in Manhattan. "Andy Warhol exhibited there... Andy-freaking-Warhol!" Astra squealed, pouring over every article she could find about the gallery after their mother told them the news.

That was a month ago. One hundred and ten days stood between them and opening night. Until the most significant moment of their mother's career.

"Enough about that," their mother said, pulling the clips from her hair until it fell in a dark wave over her shoulder. "Are you three ready for school tomorrow? The first day of senior year..." She stretched out her arms, pulling them in close, ignoring their exaggerated eyerolls and the sighs they let out.

"I already want to vomit," Cass groaned. "I can feel my intestines writhing."

Commented [CS9]: nice

Commented [CS10]: check that your tense agrees throughout

Commented [CS11]: this seems to have some timing issues (is she speaking now in the present, when did she pour over the articles—as she squealed? When her mother told them the news?)

“You should see a doctor about that.” Astra reached over, giving Cass’s hand a squeeze. “Seriously, though, just this year to get through then the orgasmic future awaits us. NYU by day, the city lights guiding us by night.”

“Okay, Gatsby,” Cass said flatly, but the corner of their lip quirked up, giving them away.

“Or maybe another adventure.” Mother finally released her hold on them, and Astra felt a coldness spread through her.

“What do you mean?” Leena was the first to ask, her shoulders going stiff at the question.

Astra hated the look their mother threw their way. She had seen it too many times before. Her lips pulled into the thin line of a smile. Both hands restless, fussing with anything she could find to occupy them; this time, it was the tools she gathered from her workstation, tucking them back into her worn canvas apron one by one.

“Look,” their mother said, her fingers stilling as they hovered above the neat line of tools tucked in place, “it’s been three years. It’s time for a change.”

“Where?” Cass mumbled.

“What about college?” Astra cut in, the wobble in her voice betraying her. Their mother couldn’t do this, she *wouldn’t*, not now, but even as the protests played in Astra’s head, she recognized them as lies.

Abandoning the apron still laid out at her station, their mother approached them. “This is not a bad thing,” she said, scanning each of their faces. “Come on, most kids beg their parents to take a gap year. Some universities even recommend it.”

“A gap year?” Astra challenged. This was not the plan. She tried to grasp at one of the dozens of arguments fighting for space in her mind, but her mother silenced her opposition before she could open her mouth.

Commented [CS12]: Is...their mom in charge of when they go to college?

“It’s late,” their mother said, holding up a hand, “you three have school tomorrow, and this decision is not up for debate. I’ve already given notice to Mr. Weaver so he has time to secure a tenant before we go.”

“Where?” Cass asked again. Astra, still holding Cass’s hand in hers, tightened her grip.

In the course of seventeen years, they had called ten different states home, though none of them felt like it. Ten different apartments. Coast to coast. The same basic white paint and stained linoleum counters in each one. Ten different schools to try and fit into.

Astra could never wrap her head around their practically nomadic existence. Cass had once chalked it up to wanderlust. It was reasonable enough. Still, something just didn’t fit. In every other instance, their mother was stable, but when it came to staying in one place, she was as unpredictable as the medium she devoted her life to.

“We leave for Iceland shortly after the exhibition. A new start for a new year.” She gave them a weak smile before rolling up the canvas apron and tucking it under her arm, making her way to the backroom.

They didn’t have time for the shock to settle in. Behind them, a sharp crash reverberated in the annealer, causing Cass to jump and Astra to mutter a few choice words.

“Language,” was all their mother said before turning back and tugging open the door to the annealer with her free hand. On the shelf, their world of glass was cracked down the center, the halves hopeless and jagged.

“Why?” Astra moaned, not entirely sure if she was lamenting the broken glass or the future her mother shattered moments earlier.

“It’s alright, kid. You know this is just part of the process sometimes. That’s the thing about glass. It keeps you humble.” With a sympathetic glance and a quick squeeze to Astra’s

Commented [CS13]: Woah. Not even letting them finish highschool?

shoulder, her mother resumed her walk to the backroom to gather their things before returning home for the night.

Astra only stood there, gripping the door of the annealer so tight her knuckles paled from the pressure.

Three years ago, their mother had promised to stay. To allow them a normal high school experience. To see the same faces day after day. To tack up posters in the bedroom they shared even though it could cost them part of their security deposit.

Apparently, time was up. She didn't know why she expected this to last. Her mother always told her not to get attached to things. Glass breaks. People move on. But just this one time, Astra **wanted to hold onto something.**

For once, she wanted to stay.

Commented [CS14]: nice

Things we like:

- Great grounding details right off the bat
- "Always ready to run" I liked this too.
- Some seriously great character details. Astra's spooky sweater taken off to reveal a skeleton tank top is very funny and tells me a lot about her
- I love that they're glass blowers, and I love the way you slide in definitions as part of the prose (like the definition on page 2 of "frit")
- "The dance of fire and breath and glass" is a great turn of phrase for glass blowing
- Another excellent character moment: "Astra's first memories were made of glass. Leena's first footsteps, in a gallery. And their mother swore, against everyone's protests, that Cass's first word had been *crucible*" I really liked this one too
- I like the conflict set up--anyone can identify with being uprooted (in the middle of senior year seems especially rough!)

Things that might need a second look:

- I really wanted to know why she swore. It was cool to see her and her sister work with glass in the first page, but I'd love if we could get in the MCs head a little more--see what being with her while she does this will teach us as readers about who she is.
- Biggest issue for me: you can't take a gap year IN HIGH SCHOOL. You can take one after it! But it's odd that it's presented as a thing everyone does to just skip senior year? Like maybe it happens but aren't there laws about that? Idk I don't have kids

- This is probably WAY too nit-picky, but first lines are kind of important: the no parking sign and the broken neon light flickering to life: is that just grounding detail or is it setting up for something? (figured I'd put it to the group)
- It definitely seems like something is being set up regarding why their mom has to flee or something right now, but I wish there was a little more to lampshade their mom's announcement. One minute everything is totally normal and the next there's this huge conflict, which felt sort of abrupt to me. This is very nitpicky. I'd love if there was some more hinting earlier that their mom is inconsistent when throughout the whole first pages I got the sense she was very consistent, not flighty the way she's later demonstrated to be.
- Check for tense agreement
- Check your POV--I thought it was omniscient at first, but then it sort of dials in on Astra? (Am I reading that wrong, or did you all feel it was more consistent?)
- This is just reader response, and the opening paragraph thing is probably part of it--it seems like this is a story that is going to be extremely focused on theme and metaphor and big picture feelings and stuff--I'm looking for those things to all connect--like the no parking sign and the breathing life into glass and all the pregnancy references. They're all really cool, and my brain is already looking for bigger picture meaning... so that's all I have to say, haha.