



THEY TELL US NOT EVERYONE deserves to matter. Dreams have to be earned, and every day, I grow more afraid that I'll never be among the worthy.

My footsteps against the pavement seem terribly loud. I walk so quickly, I'm practically running. Yet I can't escape the hailstorm in my head. What if my ranking never rises? What if I age out of the Papilio School before I find a patron? What if I'm never good enough?

Everyone else is asleep. I envy them. Though it's past curfew, I couldn't stand tossing and turning any longer. The minders shouldn't care too much as long as I stay on campus, and I'm not planning on going anywhere. All that lies beyond the school's walls are wild forests and the small, austere town of Dogwood. Papilio's founders chose this isolated location so we'd have nothing to distract us from our studies. I'm usually too busy to care, but right now, I wish I could escape for just a moment.

I crane my neck, wondering if my mother, who's somewhere on Adrye, suffered the same anxieties when she attended the Papilio School. Red and blue satellites—force field generators the government set up to block Adryil telepathy—blink among the white stars. They seem denser than before. Milo told me that the government's growing mistrustful of our alien allies. I think he has a point. For an Adryil to use telepathy on a human would violate the interstellar peace

treaties, but the satellites tell me that our government doesn't entirely believe the Adryil will honor that agreement.

The Wall of Glory glows in the middle of the quad. Intricate sculptures of instruments, dance shoes, masks, and other symbols of Papilio's six Arts adorn the back and edges of the twenty-foot-high structure. Across the front, the illuminated blue names of alumni drift against a black background. Some names shine so bold and bright, your eyes don't want to leave them. Others appear so tiny and pale, you can barely see them.

As always, the Wall makes me feel very small. Not just physically—at barely five-foot-two, I'm used to being the little one—but in every sense of the word. These are the names of Papilio's best, the ones who turned their talents into careers and now live on a resplendent world across the stars. While positions for Artists exist on Earth, they're so rare that only the few born to the rich fill them. The elites of our time remind me of the royalty depicted in operas and ballets—small in number, but great in power. Owning so much while leaving so little for everyone else. I find it all unfair, but at the same time, the Adryil can only hire from specialized schools like Papilio as stipulated by our agreement. I'm luckier than most, since I at least have a chance at a better life.

I scan the names for my mother's, but can't find it in the crowded text. I'm not surprised. She wasn't extraordinary—a section player hired two weeks before she would have aged out. Maybe there's hope for me yet. Then again, she was ranked in the top 500 at fifteen, and I've yet to break 1,000. Considering there are only about 1,500 ranked performers at Papilio, that's beyond pathetic.

I press my hand against the Wall's smooth surface and whisper, "Theia Lei." The sound of my voice, the lone disturbance in the silence other than a soft electric humming, makes me uncomfortable.

A section of the Wall glows white under my palm. The light plays with the shadows, making my hand look like some kind of five-legged insect—small but freakishly flexible with long, skinny fingers. Not very pretty, but good for playing viola. I have Mom to thank for that. Actually, I have her to thank for every part of me except my face. It's not obvious who I resemble more, since Mom and Dad were both of East Asian descent, but from all the time I've spent peering at their images, I'm sure my large, round eyes and snub nose come from Dad.

A red line circles Mom's name, which drifts along the Wall's bottom edge in tiny, dim letters. Her holographic portrait flickers into existence, and I retract my hand. The image was taken shortly before she left for Adrye. I wonder what she looks like now. Probably still as beautiful as she was at twenty. I've thought about cutting my hair short like hers, but every time I consider my long, straight locks, I know I'd miss them.

The scroll of her red violin leans against her smooth, golden cheek, and her fingers rest against the instrument's gentle curve. The powerful, eagle-like aura surrounding her makes her look mature, but she was only five years older than I am now.

Five years. That's how much time I have left to prove myself. There's only space for so many students, and each week, the school's scouts find more talented children who deserve admission. If no one hires me before I turn twenty-one, Papilio will kick me out. I'll have had my chance; I guess it's only fair to make room for new blood. If I'm lucky, they might place me in a job with one of their partner schools—as a coach or maybe a minder. Or hire me themselves if someone retires. But more likely, I'll end up in a factory. That's what happened to Dad. According to the school's records, he was sent to a textile plant in California, but they offered no further details.

Refusing the assignment isn't really an option, since you won't find work any other way. Thanks to machines, there aren't a lot of jobs left, though sometimes humans are still cheaper than bots.

My gaze turns to the text beneath my mother's portrait: "Sponsored by the Kandar Family, 2255." That means she's still with the patrons who hired her thirteen years ago. Yet in all this time, she's never once sent me a message from Adrye. I try to understand; interstellar communications are highly regulated and, with the costs of technology and permits, very expensive. Most of what she earns funnels back to Papilio to pay her debt to the school. I like to think that she's also sending money to my father. Most alums support their families on Earth with whatever remains after their debt to Papilio is paid.

Dad's saddled with the same debt, only he has to pay it off with a laborer's menial wages. He couldn't afford to send a message either, even though he's in the same country as me, just on a different coast.

Still, their silence hurts. I'd reach out to them if I could, but the school's computers aren't connected to the outside world. Again, Papilio doesn't allow any distractions for its pupils. All I have of my parents are the loving messages they left on my Linx profile, which is set up for every student the moment they arrive at the school. Even if that happened to be the same moment they were born, which is how it was with me. Most students endure a grueling audition process to get in, but those born on campus are granted automatic admission. I prefer to think that my parents chose to have me, even knowing they'd have to leave before I could talk, because they wanted to know the joys of raising a child before being locked into employment contracts that forbid Artists from having families. But more likely, I'm one of the five percent of cases in which the birth control pill doesn't do its job.

If that's so, then it's the only time I've been in the ninety-fifth percentile of anything.

Knowing I started with an advantage and fell behind only makes my mediocrity more embarrassing. In her portrait, Mom's sharp gaze seems to accuse me.

"I'm sorry, Mom," I murmur. "I'll work harder. Maybe someday, I'll join you on Adrye."

My dream is that the Kandar Family will hire me for their orchestra too. Maybe together, Mom and I can earn enough to bring Dad to Adrye. Be a family again, in a new world I can hardly imagine.

My eyes well, and I reach my fingers toward Mom's shimmering portrait. How is it possible to miss her so much when I barely remember her? I don't remember Dad at all. Since he aged out, his name's not even on the Wall. At least I can still watch Mom's student performances.

I withdraw my hand and whisper, "Play archive."

A hologram of a stage appears. Mom stands in the center, sparkling in a flowing, silver dress. She strikes her violin strings, and the strong, open chords ring hollow in my ears. Though she plays passionately, there's something missing: subtlety. Her notes slash through the air like the coarse strokes of a paintbrush pressed too hard against a canvas, lacking the nuance it takes to create true beauty.

Strangely, that encourages me. Her playing may be flawed, but she still found patronage. And she never gave up. I shouldn't either.

Her performance ends. Smiling, I applaud with the audience in the recording. Maybe on Adrye, she's smiling and thinking of me too.

"End." Mom's portrait dissolves. I gaze at the names swimming across the Wall. "Inna Havener" shines at the top, lording over the rest in her splendor. She's who we all want to become. Born to impoverished laborers, she's now one of the greatest sopranos in Papilian history. Patrons fought over her, each offering her more money than the next. She eventually earned enough to move her family out of Dogwood and bring her sister along to Adrye.

I find it fascinating that the Adryil value our Arts so much. We have Katarin Kaminski to thank for that. She was the first Earthling they truly admired, a brilliant aerialist who lived decades ago and captured their imaginations in a way no one on their world could. A silver statue of her, beautifully contorted with limbs wrapped in frozen silks, tops the Wall.

I check my watch. The white numbers “12:56” blink against the slender black band; it’s later than I thought. I leave the quad and enter an alley between two concrete buildings, heading to my dorm in the Orchestra’s sector.

A shrill mechanical wail rips through the silence.

Alarm lights flash, turning the world red. I freeze. *What’s happening?*

A shadow approaches, running toward me. I can tell it’s a boy from the shape of his silhouette, and no one here stays long enough to be called a man. Only students are housed on campus; coaches and other staff either live in Dogwood or remote in from other parts of the world.

The boy throws a glance over his shoulder. Who is he? What’s he running from?

“Halt immediately,” a deep voice blares over the school’s speakers. A line of silver security bots stream out of an alley on their large black wheels, chasing the boy.

Why are they after him? Would they come after me, too, if they saw me here? I should run, or hide, or *something*. Not knowing what to do, I turn back the way I came. My heart beats so rapidly, I fear I’ll collapse.

Blinding white lights flood the quad, and tall security bots emerge from the alley. The red signals on their metal heads flash as they repeat in unison, “Halt immediately.”

They must be talking to me—they’re coming right at me. I stop inches from the Wall, trembling. I don’t want to find out what they’d do if I disobeyed.

Someone behind me grabs my shoulders, and I nearly jump out of my skin. Before I can do anything else, he spins me to face him.

I gasp. The boy stares down at me, his thick black hair gleaming under the lights. The intensity of his gaze takes my breath away. His azure eyes glow with otherworldly luminescence beneath his straight black brows, mesmerizing against his amber skin. He's not human—he's Adryil. I blink, stunned by his presence, and find that I can't take my eyes off his hypnotic gaze. I've never seen a face like his, a face so beautiful and fierce it frightens me. Its planes slope with statue-like perfection, and his skin is smooth with youth.

How did he get in? Papilio has strict rules about who can enter; even the families of students are barred except during visiting hours. What does he want?

For a moment, we stand there in silence. His stare bores into mine, like he's trying to read my mind. No—he *can* read my mind. Earth's telepathy-blocking satellites only work when you're at least a few feet away from an Adryil; this close, he could see my every thought if he wanted to. Is he in my head? My heart trembles. I shrink, knowing I should run but too paralyzed to move.

He breaks his gaze, and his eyes dart around wildly. Expressions flicker across his face—fear, anger, panic, then strangely, something akin to triumph. When he turns back to me, something about him pleads.

“Take this.” The crisp accent of the Adryil colors his voice. He grabs my hand and presses what feels like an oval-shaped stone into my palm. “Don't let them take it from you.”

I wrap my fingers around the small object, barely aware of what I'm doing.

“Freeze.” A security bot's mechanical voice rings in my ears.

The Adryil boy leaps away from me and runs, but he barely makes it a few steps before a flash of white engulfs him. A stun blast—white means nonlethal shots. He collapses onto the ground, and half a dozen security bots approach him, weapons raised.

Terrified, I back away. Dull points stab my back; I've walked into the Wall's carved edge.

My eyes fix on the Adryil boy. Unconscious and surrounded, he suddenly looks vulnerable. He can't be much older than me. For some reason, I want to protect him. I don't know him, yet I can't bear the idea of those heartless machines taking him away.

Don't be stupid, Iris. If Security's after him, he must be dangerous.

And he's a telepath. I've never encountered an Adryil before and have no idea what telepathy feels like. For all I know, he planted that thought in me. But to what end? If he read my mind, surely he'd have realized that I'm not the one to pin his hopes on. I'm barely brave enough to argue with my coach, let alone defy Security.

A bot wheels toward me. It's at least five times my size, and the black weapons at the ends of each arm point straight at me. I haven't done anything wrong, but does it know that? I try to back away further, and the Wall's sculptures carve painfully into my back.

I suddenly realize I'm still clutching the item the Adryil boy gave me. Security must want anything he brought with him. Fresh fear chills my bones, and my whole body shakes as the bot draws closer. I should turn in the forbidden object while I have the chance. If I don't, the school could expel me, destroying all the dreams I've worked so hard for.

But this item, whatever it is, meant enough to the boy that he spent time he could have used to escape entrusting it to me. I peer at his face. Even with his eyes closed, something about him still strikes me to the core. For the first time, I notice how he's dressed. Simple black pants and a black T-shirt—like the kind Milo wears. He's... just a boy. He may be called an alien, but from here, he seems like one of us.

What if he read my mind to see if he could trust me? Did he see something that made him believe in me? Who is he, and why did he come?

Questions swirl through my head. A powerful voice inside me says I shouldn't risk myself for a stranger, but the need for answers overcomes it. The school would never tell me—they don't like to encourage interest in anything outside our studies. The item is my only chance.

The Adryil boy can't be in my head now—he's unconscious. These thoughts are mine, and they're saying that handing the object over to Security would mean destroying any chance I have at learning the truth—and it would mean betraying him.

I can't do that.

The bot stops in front of me. It's now or never. I move my hand behind me, feeling along the Wall's elaborate edge. My fingers brush against a crevice, and I shove the object inside, tucking it as far back as I can.

Even though it has no eyes, the bot seems to stare at me. "State your name."

"I-Iris Lei." I clench my empty fist behind my back. Heat rises from every inch of my skin, and yet my face feels cold. *Did it see what I did?*

Yellow light shoots out of the bot's black torso, surrounding me in a holographic haze. "Come with me, Iris Lei. You are needed for questioning." It wheels forward.

I follow. If I leave the bounds of the hologram, alarms will peal. Since the bot didn't search me, Security must not have seen me hide the object. I'm safe—at least, for now.

I glance back at the Adryil boy. Metal ropes, extending from two bots on either side of him, coil around his slender yet broad-shouldered body. They wind around his long legs and pin his arms to his sides. The sight of him bound like that fills me with horror. The bots draw closer and use the ropes to lift him, then wheel away. The other machines follow, blocking him from my view.

I can't help feeling as if I should have saved him somehow.