

**THE**  
**IMMUNDUS**

Odolf Mingan



**T H E**  
**IMMUNDUS**

**CHRISTINA ENQUIST**



Odolf Mingan

*The Immundus*

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But I say unto you, Love your enemies, bless them that curse you, do good to them that hate you, and pray for them which despitefully use you and persecute you.

*Matthew 5:44*



PART ONE

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**IN THE BEGINNING THERE  
WAS DARKNESS**



## ONE

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# COLOSSEUM

The refrigerator is bare and broken, unable to order the fruits and vegetables we are missing. I was hoping to eat something before the game. My father is working and probably won't be home until I'm already asleep, so I'll have to go to the commissary before the game. It's times like these I miss my mom. Today, June 8, 2828 is the anniversary of her unexpected departure. It's been four years of trickling lamentation. A murky feeling casts a shadow on my heart, like the clouds looming outside.

*Why would the climatologist program clouds for game day?* I push the thought away. Maybe they'll dissipate by game time. I run back in the house, grabbing my jacket from the living room sofa.

I walk to my car. Her doors open when I get close enough for her to recognize my microchips, embedded throughout my body at birth.

"Hello, Nia," she greets me, a smile in her tone as she revs her engine.

"Hi, Jules," I slide into the front seat. She must be fully sun-powered because her tone is grumpy when she's running low. "Display commissary collection history." I listen attentively as Jules recites my purchase history. "Resubmit the last order, then take me to the commissary."

Suddenly, an image of Mom preparing rice pilaf with sautéed mushrooms and garlic plants itself in my mind. The memory so vivid I can taste the garlic and smell her scent—a bouquet of jasmine, rose, and lavender, with a bottom note of vanilla. A lump in my throat restricts air to my lungs and my chest tightens.

A face, a common one, one that I've seen a thousand times, appears on the dash screen. "Immundus have been sighted along the eastern wall near Genesis. Guards have been deployed. All streets from Johnson to Burch will be closed to traffic and pedestrians. All citizens in the Mission district must remain indoors." I cage my breath. "The Spero match in the Tower District will remain scheduled as planned." My breath escapes with relief. *At least the game is still happening. I wonder if the drill instructor will work us harder tomorrow. I see fifty push-ups in my future.*

"Jules, play Spero playlist."



It's a fifteen-minute drive to the commissary, which allows enough time for them to pull the order together. The drive-through is not as packed as I expected. Only two cars wait in front of me. I tell Jules to lower the music volume as we approach the 3D hologram woman.

"Good morning, Nia! Your order will be ready by the time you reach the door."

Each person, child, and adult in Domus receives two hundred food credits for the month; each item collected is worth one credit since all food is valued equally. There are no bulk items, just individual items. We're paid the first of the month. I have 180 food credits left after this collection. It takes a few minutes before I make it to the 4D hologram door. My cart of food comes out the door and hovers around to the back of Jules, who already has her trunk open. Her long metallic trunk arms reach out, grab the bags from the cart, and pull them in.

"Groceries are secure," Jules says, closing her trunk and pulling away. I catch a glimpse of the cart in the rearview mirror, returning through the door.

Four twenty-five p.m. displays on Jules's screen. I still have plenty of time to make it to the game. My eyes linger too long on the date—reminding me again of my mother and how I felt at twelve.

She left at the end of my first year in school. I remember being

excited to tell Mom I was going to play in the Spero games the next year, expecting to come home to a warm house, a smile, and a “How was your day, honey.” Instead, I found the house eerily quiet and dark, shades drawn. No warmth. No smile. No words. Just a black hole of silence.

“Mom?” I shouted. Silence greeted me. “Mom, are you home?”

I walked into the kitchen, thinking that she must have gone to the store. On the table was a small folded sheet of paper with the word “Nia” written in her handwriting on the front. I opened it and read the first words: “Nia, I love you!” I still remember feeling sunshine in the pit of my stomach. My mom was the only person who said “I love you” to me. I don’t know why my father never said it—still doesn’t, even though I’m the only one left in our family.

I continued reading: “Please know that what I am doing is because of this love for you. I want to keep you safe. I’m sorry I can’t say more. I’m leaving. But know that I will always be with you, in your heart.”

A million questions flooded my mind like a raging river with nothing to impede its current. *Safe from what? Leaving? Why? What does this mean? You can’t leave me, too.* I’d just lost my best friend, Fiducia, three years prior to that moment. As if my body knew the pain before my mind did, I remember falling to my knees, my body bent forward, and gripping at the bamboo flooring. A sharp pain radiated through my stomach, replacing the warmth felt seconds prior. Every muscle in my body constricted as though in the grasp of a python. My head grew light and a buzzing began in my ears as the world around me became enshrouded in a thick fog.

The next thing I remember was my father waking me two hours later. I realized then that I must have passed out. I looked up at my father. He had just arrived from work—the note dangled from his fingers. His eyes reflected anguish, his eyebrows drawn in, and his skin sallow.

“Sam, replay Rosemary’s last moments here,” he said. Sam, our house, had a hologram interface that could take the shape of a man or woman, depending on user preference. We had programmed her as an older woman, around her eighties.

Sam appeared and morphed into my mother, per my father's request. I watched as my mom placed every letter on the note, but I couldn't bear to watch anymore. I had run upstairs to my bedroom, while my father replayed the video over and over again.

My heart shrank into itself then, a deep melancholy encumbering my body and mind. I couldn't speak or sleep or scream. All I could do was feel. Feel the loss. Feel the heartache. Feel the pain. I lost my mom.

I didn't understand my mom's choice then and I don't understand it now. Both my father and I have been tormented by her decision, and neither of us have been able to console the other. Since she left, life has held a void for me.

I increase the volume of the music again and it drowns out my memories.



I arrive at The Colosseum, known as the AT&T stadium in the Genus Guadium history books. A myriad of colorful attire adorns the eager spectators already forming at the front entrance.

"Jules, drop me off at the player entrance, then go home to deliver the groceries. Sam is expecting them."

The game starts at seven o'clock and it's the only one for the entire quarter, so everyone gets there early. The four teams spend all quarter gearing up to play against each other and the tension is noticeable. My team consists of Eric, Alex, and Casey. We're the Cogs from the School of Cognition. The team from Genus Voluptas is called the Affects; the ones from the School of Physiology, the Physos; and the fourth from the School of Sociology is the Soshes.

"What took you so long?" A voice booms from the distance. I shield the sun from my eyes and make out that it's Eric at the player's entrance door. It's open a quarter, just enough for him to have his feet planted in the building with his body leaning outside, one hand against the door frame and the other on the door knob. I trot toward the door. I can feel my ponytail swaying back and forth with every footfall.

“I stopped at the commissary.” He opens the door wider to let me in. The colosseum halls are a light beige and wrap around the outer edge of the colosseum, branching out into rooms, lockers, and offices. Our locker room is around the bend.

“You? Why didn’t you have Jules go to the commissary after she dropped you off?”

“Yeah. I guess I could have done that. I have a lot on my mind.”

“That’s right.” Eric’s voice sounds hollow. He has been my best friend since I started school, which was only shortly after Fiducia died, and before my mom abandoned my father and I. So he was there for me during all my emotional swings, from “life is great” to “life is hell”—and never dissed me for it. He never forgets. “Are you going to be able to keep your head in the game or should we call for your backup?”

“I can play. I need this distraction.”

“It needs to mean more to you than a distraction if we’re going to win.”

I grab his arm and stop him mid-step. “I’ve got this.” I cross my arms, fists to shoulders. “I promise.” He smiles and nods in acceptance.

In the locker room, Casey and Alex are already in their uniforms, sitting on a bench, talking. Our school colors are black and blue, so the uniforms are black, form-fitting jumpsuits, with wide blue stripes running up the left and right sides. The back of the uniform mirrors the front, except for the zipper that goes down the center from the neck to the small of our backs.

Casey spots me and swings her legs over the bench, away from Alex, and walks toward me. Her hands grasp my shoulders. “Are you doing okay? I was worried we were going to have to call your backup.”

“Yeah. I just had to stop at the commissary to get some food.”

“Your fridge isn’t linked to Jules?”

“The fridge is broken and the mechbot that usually handles those repairs is out of commission, too.”

“Why didn’t you just send Jules?”

“I know, I already heard that from Eric.”

Coach Brisbane, a squat man, bellows out, “Casey! Leave her be.” Swinging his finger between Eric and I, he continues, “You two hurry up and get dressed. We have twenty minutes before we have to be on the field.”

I make my way to the changing room and quickly dress, wondering the entire time what obstacles the gamers and audience have planned for us this time. The gamers give the audience obstacle options to choose from for each player. So whatever we experience it’s because the audience selected it.

I step out of the changing area and take a seat next to Eric.

“Is your dad coming to the game this quarter?” Alex asks, causing Casey to nudge him in the ribs with her elbow. She can do that because they’ve been dating for two years.

“No,” I choke out. My father couldn’t care less about my games—he’s never been to one. We used to attend the Spero games as a family when Mom was around, but since she left, he spends most his waking hours in his lab. The only time we ever really talk is in the morning because I’m asleep when he gets home—if he gets home. There’ve been countless nights when I’ve left dinner for him on the counter, but it’s still there in the morning. Untouched.

Coach gives a short motivational speech and finishes right before the bell rings, letting us know we have five minutes to be on the field, so we trek over to our starting positions. The colosseum is a bright white. I stare up at the colorful spectators sitting in their chairs with their odd-looking glasses that allow them to choose the obstacles and zoom in on a specific player they want to watch; they also have the option of choosing different viewpoints or angles, and the spectator can even watch the game from the viewpoint of one of the players. They’re probably reviewing all the obstacle options, eager to make their selections when the game starts.

The referee along with three other women approach us on the field, placing an earwrap around our ears. The earwrap allows the referees to communicate with us. They use a unique adhesive to make sure it stays

on throughout the game. After the game, it washes off with a special liquid. Nothing else will remove the adhesive. I've tried.

The four dimension holographic maze begins to take form filling the entire field of the stadium. The smooth cream-colored floor takes form first. It's as though a layer of coconut cream was spread across the green field. The walls sprout next, a sea of light gray with small black dots speckled throughout the walls—cameras. I see the first obstacle appear near the entrance of the maze. The maze has an obstacle course strewn throughout, designed to test instinct, intelligence, agility, strength, and creativity. The team that makes it to the other side of the maze first wins.

If a player fails to overcome an obstacle or if the timer runs out for a teammate, then the entire team loses and the maze provides exits for the losing teammates. Every quarter, coach reminds us of that rule, so we understand that a team is only as good as its weakest player. When we train, we help each teammate build their talents and strengths, rather than focusing on our own development. If three of the four teams fail, then the remaining team in the maze wins by default without having to make it to the other side of the maze. My team has won almost every year, and one-third of our wins are by default.

“Here we go!” says Eric, looking at me as he hits his left palm with his fist.

When I first volunteered to participate in Spero, it was for fun. But the moment I first played, I realized what an escape it was—a temporary release from the constant ache in my heart. I mask the pain from the world, but Spero is the only time I can mask it from myself.

Each team begins to make their way to the south entrance of the maze. The other teams' uniforms are analogous in design to our own but distinguishable by their school colors. Soshes in apple red and black, Affects in lime green and black, and the Physos in silver and black.

A line appears at the entrance informing us where to start. We position ourselves at the line, my teammates to my right, and the

other teams to my left. We wait, anxiously anticipating the bell that will alert us to begin. Seconds feel like minutes as I wait, my frenetic heart already barreling forward. My hands are clammy, and my eyes fixate on the first obstacle. If a player runs prior to the bell, the team is immediately eliminated.

The bell sounds.

And we're off.

## T W O

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# SPERO

We surge—a wave of bodies stampeding toward the first obstacle. A Soshe bumps my arm as I run past her. Four players are ahead of me, but one of them is Eric. I arrive at the first obstacle, a contorted mess of wood that we have to get through. *Agility*. I spot a spiral-shaped section of the wood to squeeze through. On my left, I catch a glimpse of Eric climbing over the wooden structure as an Affect tries to pull him down. I hurl my body up and into the spiral opening, slinking my way through. Even with the uniform, I feel the roughness of the wood. I spot Casey to my right, making her way through a hole in the jumble wood as well. I don't see Alex, though.

“Ten seconds,” the referee announces in the earpiece.

Adrenaline bursts throughout my body and in three large thrusts I finally reach the end, stretching my arms to the ground and somersaulting to the floor. Players are scattering into all four of the possible routes. Then the maze shifts. Now instead of four possible routes ahead of me, there are two, left or right, with a solid wall in front of me. Five other players, including Casey, are faced with the same option. This is new—the gamers haven't done this before.

“I'll go left,” Casey says adamantly, sweat already beading up on her brow.

“Okay.” I nod in affirmation.

My head snaps back and I yell out in pain. Someone had pulled me back by my ponytail. When I turn around to see who it is, I feel a foot swipe underneath mine. I collapse to the floor, my butt and elbows getting the brunt of the impact. I look ahead to see who pulled me down—a Soshe. I look down for a moment processing what just happened, then take a deep breath. I jump back up, adrenaline searing my skin. I sprint to the Soshe, tackling her to the ground. A crimson river gushes from her nose, splattering across the cream-colored ground. I wasn't expecting that.

"I'm sorry," I say, feeling guilty for drawing blood.

The maze shifts again, presenting me with three routes where there was initially one. My head feels dizzy from the shifting of the maze, and I wonder how I'm going to get to the other end if it continues shifting. I take the route in the middle, glancing back to see if anyone is behind me—it's clear. A hologram of a woman appears, along with three doors.

"Beyond one of the doors is a test of your creativity. The other two will kick you out of the game."

*Instinct.*

"You have ten seconds to decide."

I close my eyes and steady my racing mind, knowing that my decision could cost the game. I step to the middle door. Slowly curling my fingers around the handle, I open it and step into a room. The door disappears into the wall. There is a small table in the corner. On the table lays a candle, a box of thumbtacks, and a book of matches.

The referee announces, "The Soshes have been removed from the Maze." I sigh, relief spilling through my body. *Two teams left.*

The same female hologram reemerges saying, "Affix the candle, while lit, to the wall, ensuring that no wax drips on the table."

I pick up the candle and a thumbtack. *How am I supposed to use this tiny thumbtack to stick the candle to the wall?* I look at all the items, picturing different ways in my mind, until I realize I can use the large box that the thumbtacks are in to hold the candle. I dump the thumbtacks on the table and place the candle into it to make sure it fits—it does. I

pin the box to the wall, place the candle in it, then light the candle. The room and table dissipate, a route taking its place.

In the distance, there are several routes shooting off from this one route, like branches from a tree. I run down the route, slowing to a jog as I approach the first set of paths. I peer left and right, looking for others, but I see no one. I wonder if the gamers are leaving me alone as punishment since I caused the Soshe to bleed. I take a few more steps along the route I'm on and peer into some other branches. Still no one. Rather than continue to check all divergent paths ahead, I take a path to the right. The maze shifts. I hold my unsettled stomach and look back, but a wall stands from where I came. In front of me, a female hologram appears. The ground beneath her becomes water for what seems like a quarter of a mile. Just as a motorboat manifests, she says, "You must bring the bag of grain, the chicken, and the fox across to the other side of the water." She points to my right where hologram versions of these things appear. "But you can only carry one at a time."

I reach my foot toward the water curious to see how deep it is, but I stop myself, realizing I might disqualify my team. I glance over at the bag of grain, the chicken, and the fox. The animals are just as I remember them from the animal museum, but are currently motionless. I figure once I make a selection, the chicken and fox will somehow activate, making the task more difficult. If I take the fox over and leave the chicken with the grain, the chicken will undoubtedly break into the bag and eat the grain, and if I take the grain over first and leave the fox with the chicken, then the fox will get the chicken. But if I take the chicken over first, the fox could care less about the grain, so I guess I'm taking the chicken over first.

I grab the chicken, which begins squawking and flapping its feathers. When I step into the motorboat with the chicken, the fox awakens, pacing back and forth at the edge of the water. There is nowhere for the fox to go since a wall blocks him from escaping. I travel to the other side, struggling to hold on to the chicken as it wrestles with me. Its feathers are soft and slippery, reminding me of a blanket at home. Almost there . . .

almost there. I drop the chicken off on the small piece of maze. There is nowhere for the chicken to go either since a wall keeps it near the edge of the water. “Ten minutes,” chimes the referee.

I return quickly to the fox and grain. *Now which do I take?* If I take the fox and drop it off, it will probably eat the chicken. If I take the grain, then the chicken will dig into the bag and eat the grain. I’m back to the problem I had initially. *Ugh!* What if I keep one in the boat with me to keep them separate? If I take the grain over and then bring the chicken back and get the fox, then the fox and the grain will be on the other side with the chicken on the original side. *Yes! That’s what I’ll do.* Without getting out of the boat, I reach for the bag of grain, dragging it into the motorboat.

When I reach the other side, I lift the bag of grain onto the ground and grab the chicken as it approaches the bag. I reach the original side, drop off the chicken and quickly grab the fox before it attacks the chicken. The fox’s fur is softer than the chicken’s feathers and not as agitated as the chicken. It relaxes on my lap the entire ride. I arrive at the other side and drop off the fox. Halfway to the originating side the referee announces, “Three minutes.” I speed up, grab the chicken, and make it to the other side before time is up. The moment I plant both feet on the ground near the now motionless fox and chicken, they disappear and three routes appear in front of me. Behind me lay a pure white path where the water was. “Congratulations!” The referee announces, a smile in his voice.

I can’t help but grin. I take the middle path, running about ten paces into the route when a pole materializes in front of me. I wait for the hologram to appear to tell me what I’m supposed to do with the pole. A ceiling appears throughout my route. A breeze fills the hall, growing stronger each second. I grab the pole when the force of the wind pushes my body. My feet slide from the now-hurricane wind. I close my tear-filled eyes. My body lifts into the air, parallel to the floor, my legs undulating like a flag in the wind. I grip the pole tightly, one hand above the other. A cramping pain shoots through my hands. *Do not let go. Do not let go. Do not let go.*

The moment I feel I might not be able to hold on any longer, the winds cease, allowing my body to fall to the floor. I massage my stiff hands.

The ceiling recedes and the pole retracts, leaving me in an empty room with a door on three sides. *How do I escape a constant changing maze?* An Affect walks in, followed by a Physo. The female hologram appears, transporting us to a snow-covered field. It's beautiful. In the distance there are trees—lots of trees—and a winding babbling creek. I reach down, allowing the snow to slide through my fingers, numbing my skin and radiating pain through the bones of my hand. How could something so beautiful cause such pain?

“You are in a harsh environment,” says the hologram. “It is twenty-five degrees below zero, but at nighttime it will be below forty.”

The air doesn't match what we are being told.

“The nearest town is twenty miles away. Based on this information, you must use the following items to stay alive.”

The hologram points to a table with eleven items appearing before us. They are a stringy-looking sponge made of metal, a laser blade, a cymbal, a battery, a large jar of coconut oil with a very shiny metal lid, a strainer, three large rolls of plain paper, extra clothes for each of us, a twenty-by-twenty-foot piece of heavy duty canvas, a compass, and three bananas. “You have twenty minutes to devise a plan to determine in what order and for what purpose you will use the items. If you do not choose correctly, all teams lose.”

“*All* teams lose?” The Physo repeats, snarling.

“What kind of game is this?” The Affect chimes in. The hologram disappears. I glance over at the Affect and Physo.

“Does anyone have any ideas on what paper can be used for?” The Physo asks, one eyebrow arched up.

“It can be used to stay warm when bundled around the body underneath one's clothes,” replies the Affect in her singsong voice. “In history class, we watch classic shows and I've seen this technique used more than once.”

“I love shows. She’s right. I’ve seen that, also,” I respond. I want to contribute something, so I say, “Bananas can be used . . .”

“Isn’t that obvious! It’s what we eat,” the Physo interjects with his stentorian voice, his tone demeaning.

“If you let me finish, you would learn that we could also use the banana peels to filter the creek water since we need to stay hydrated,” I argue. His beady eyes and curled mouth reveal his dissatisfaction.

“That’s pretty cool!” says the Affect. At least one of them seems to be affable. Her comment gives me enough confidence to make another suggestion.

“I think the important thing to consider is that we’re supposedly freezing right now. What else can we use beside the paper to stay warm?”

“The battery and the steel wool,” the Physo responds. “We rub the battery against the steel wool until it catches on fire, but we’ll need to use the laser blade to cut down some of those trees for wood first, so we can place the steel wool on the wood to give us a large fire.”

Our discussion continues and before we realize it, time has passed. “Five minutes remain,” rings in my ear. We glance at each other and finalize what we are going to tell the hologram.

I realize that even if we choose correctly, if one of the other teams gets it wrong, we are all out. This didn’t make sense to me. Why would the gamers add this type of challenge and this type of consequence where there might not be a winner? The Physo shares our plan with the hologram.

“Congratulations!” The hologram announces as the maze returns us to the room where we started.

Smiles are uncaged at our victory. My heart still racing as we wait to find out if the other teams passed. Three routes suddenly appear. We’re safe. Without saying another word, each of us takes a separate path.

I take a path that seems to lead to a dead end, but as I get closer I notice at the end I can turn left or right. As I turn right, I bump into Alex around the corner.

“Oops. Sorry!” he says with a flushed face.

“Fancy meeting you here,” I say facetiously.

“What’s down the way you came?”

“I just finished a team—” A wall appears between Alex and I.

“No conversing in the game,” the referee announces through my earpiece, “unless you are working on a team challenge, which you currently are not.”

I turn around and jog down the path. A hologram appears. Around ten feet of the floor in front of me disappears, leaving a large black hole. Small square stepping-stones appear in zig-zag formation, hovering over nothing and level with the floor.

“You have ten seconds to make it across without falling.” I look down into pitch black. There must be something down there. The gamers wouldn’t risk our lives.

“On the count of three, I will say *go*. Are you ready?”

“Yes,” I say, narrowing my gaze on the stones.

“One . . . Two . . . Three . . . Go!”

My left foot hits the first stone, second, third, zig-zagging across when I hear, “The Affects have been removed from the Maze.” Distracted, my footing is not secure on the next stone and I start sliding off the edge, but I am moving so fast that I don’t lose my balance, and manage to make it across.

Two holograms appear with varying heights and builds—both larger than me.

“You must fight each hologram,” the referee announces.

I approach the female, receiving a swift kick to the jaw, knocking me down onto my hands and knees. Blood swells in my mouth, some spilling to the floor. *I suppose I deserved that since I drew blood earlier.* I spit and push myself up to standing position.

I circle the hologram that punched me, from a distance, fists up. I punch the female, but my fist slides through. “That’s not fair!” I yell up and out toward the crowd.

“You have to be faster than—” I swing my arms violently hitting her stomach and ribs.

The other hologram holds his ground. My knuckles tense and ache. Even with the daily morning combat training that prepares us for a possible war against the Immundus, the conditioning does not diminish the pain. Every citizen of Domus, eleven and older, is considered military. Her fist digs into my side, the side that is still slightly bruised, where a stick pole was jammed the week prior, causing me to scream out. I grab her head, ram it to my knees, and kick her in the stomach, forcing her to fall back against the other hologram—sending both to the ground. They disappear on impact.

“You now have five minutes to exit the maze.”

I never made it this far without the other teams losing. I run feverishly through the one route given. I slip around one of the corners but rise swiftly. *I can't let my team down. I can't let my team down. I can't let my team down.*

“Two minutes to exit the maze.”

I hear the drumming of my heart in my ears, beating faster than my feet are taking me. A stream of sweat rolls down one of my cheeks, skimming my mouth. Salty. A sudden tinge of thirst occupies my throat.

“One minute to exit the maze.”

An aching pain makes itself known on the right side of my abdomen, as though my insides are twisting. *Are my teammates done and waiting for me? What if I'm the reason we lose?* I reach another corner—gentler this time. Please let this be the way out. With one foot around the corner, the maze disintegrates. The remaining players scattered throughout the field. It looks like no one made it out of the maze.

“The Gamers won!” The referee’s voice boomed across the stadium.

How can the gamers win? They control the maze—they weren’t playing. Were they? And if they were, why weren’t we informed?

## T H R E E

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# SCHOOL

From my upstairs bedroom, I hear a knock on my front door, but I trust Sam to answer. She used to have the ability to scan the chips of visitors, but with my dad so consumed with work, he hasn't gotten around to getting a new mechbot to handle the repairs. I would do it myself, but bots are not allowed to be purchased by anyone under the age of twenty-one.

"Who, may I ask, is seeking entrance?"

"Nia's knight in shining armor," Eric replies.

"Nia. Your knight in shining armor is at the door," Sam announces.

I roll my eyes. "Sam, tell him I'm coming down." I pull my hair into a ponytail, then dash downstairs, my hair brushing the nape of my neck. Through the door, I see him in his jeans and T-shirt. The door disintegrates as I approach. Eric's standing there with a smirk on his face, enjoying his comment.

"Your Tesla awaits," he says, gesturing toward his cherry red car. As we near his car, the door dissipates, and a glint of sunlight from the solar panels on the car pokes my eyes. I slide into a seat.



Eric rubs the back of his neck, darts a gaze at me, then rests his eyes on his hands.

“So . . .” he starts, his hands unable to find peace, wrestling with each other as if one could find dominance over the other. Something is definitely on his mind.

“What?” I ask, my heart beating to the rhythm of a drum roll in anticipation of what he’s struggling to say.

*Spit it out, Eric.*

His car starts driving. He’s already programmed the autopilot to take us to school. Today’s our last day. The day we find out where we will serve our apprenticeship for the next five years.

He looks up at me with a strangeness in his eyes. “I saw you talking to James after the game. Anything going on there?” His words trip over each other as they speed from his mouth. His acorn eyes take root on mine.

“No, nothing is ever going on in my love life, Eric. You know that.” James is one of the most attractive guys in our school, and we have Futures class together. But I’m more interested in the consequences of restoring extinct species than in James. Futures is my favorite class because every class is about looking at decisions and identifying all possible consequences. By the end of the class, the media wall is always packed with branches of consequences of consequences of consequences. Mr. Carrillo always says, the problem with the previous centuries is that they always made decisions by looking at their present needs or desires and at the past, bound by a fear of repeating history. They never considered the distant future when making decisions, otherwise the arctic poles would still exist and oceans would not have swallowed so much of the land, and our species would not be suffering extinction like the animals before us.

I peer out the car window, admiring the deciduous trees lining our block. Eric has always been there for me, so I guess it’s natural he would be concerned with my love life—or lack thereof.

The car turns a corner bringing a park into view. *The* park. The one where Fiducia died. I’ve avoided it the last five years and usually take the longer route to school, but today I let Eric take me. I want to scream at

him for driving this way. Instead, I plunge down the words with a deep cough—he knew her, too, and it wouldn't be fair of me to scream.

“Are you okay?” Eric’s words poke at me, but my mind is on allagine, the genetic disorder that killed Fiducia. I hope to discover a cure for it when I start my apprenticeship.

“Fine.”

We finally turn the block, erasing the park from my view, but a part of my mind is still tethered to it. The watchtower comes into view. It’s the tallest building, taller even than the wall that surrounds our genus, Genus Gaudiam. We are one of twelve left and protected by walls and translucent shields, though we are connected by technology. Our ancestors would have called this a “city,” but it’s been a long time since we used that term. Our genus is located in what used to be called Arlington, Texas. We live around thirty minutes from a large, barren ocean—devoid of life—I’ve never seen. I’ve always been curious about what life is like beyond our genus wall. Too bad I’ll never get the chance, since the only people with access to the watchtowers are students whose career assessment deemed them watchguards.

My conversation with James comes back to me and I remember something that will make Eric laugh. “Oh, James did say something funny, though. He said, ‘Tell your boyfriend to call me.’” I pull my eyes from the window, directing my attention to Eric. “And I told him I didn’t have a boyfriend, but apparently he thought you and I were together.”

“Why would he want me to call him?”

“I can’t believe *that’s* what you focus on. I don’t know why. Maybe to share clothing tips?” I return my gaze outside the window.

“I don’t need advice on what to wear.”

The rest of the ride to school is smothered in awkward silence. Too silent for his car, apparently, which offers to play music for us.

“Not now . . . thanks, Genia!” Eric tells his car.

My eyes flick to Eric, and I’m sure they’re wide as saucers. “Genia? When did you change your car’s name? And to my full name?”

“Last week. I thought it would be a cool name for her.” He shifts in his seat and sends his glance away from me.

I razz him the rest of the way to school about using my real name. He shrugs off my comments.



When we arrive on campus, the usual hustle and bustle of classmates has trickled down to a few passersby. I gaze at the digital display on my forearm to check the time. We’re late.

Each career prep school is in a different building of what used to be the University of Texas Arlington, but since universities no longer exist, this is where we spend our five years of school prior to our five-year apprenticeships. The School of Cognition is a three-story building on the south end of campus. Eric’s class is on the third floor, so he takes the outdoor tube. My class is on the first floor. It’s weird to think this will be the last time I’m walking through these doors. It feels like I’ve been walking through them forever.

Everyone in Genus Guadium starts school after they’ve turned eleven years of age, because that is when children stop dying from allagine. I guess the Genus Council figures they shouldn’t waste an education on a child who might die. Instead, parents have to teach their children reading, writing, and basic math in preparation to take the career assessment. We take the assessment a few months before we start school, to determine which career we will have as adults. Then we’re assigned to a school with a specific curriculum that prepares us for our apprenticeships—and today is the day that matters most.

I walk down the expansive hallway. Most doors are closed, but the door to Calculus class is still open and Mrs. Wiler is at the front of the classroom teaching. I tiptoe through the door, hoping she won’t say anything, but the rickety-rackety-clackety of my shoes yanks my classmates’ attention toward me—eyes prickling my skin as I make my way to my seat. I plop myself down, the lumbar of the seat adjusts to my body, and the desk swings into position in front of me.

“Glad you could join us, Nia,” Mrs. Wiler says, her voice thick with sarcasm. Calculus is not my favorite topic. I think it’s because the teacher has had it in for me all year. I can get by, but only with Alex’s help. I’m so glad he’s in my class.

“Glad I could be here.” I give her a just-leave-me-alone smile. She doesn’t seem too enthused by my response, but it’s enough to appease her, so she continues her lesson.

Sabrina leans over the moment Mrs. Wiler turns away. “Great game last night.” Sabrina’s soft voice surfs the air like cumulus clouds on a calm day. She’s one of the brightest students in class, and I picture her on the Genus Council one day. She’s not a hologram either, which is nice. We attend classes with students in other genres, though not in person. Instead, 4D holographic forms appear in their stead here, and I appear the same to them there. We can see, touch, hear, and smell the students even though they aren’t here. Still. You can tell the difference.

“Thanks,” I say.

A hand touches my left shoulder from behind. “Alex wants you to check your messages,” whispers Robert, a hologram from Genus Amatista, which is on the other side of Domus and used to be called Canada. I open my messages on the screen on my desk—or dreen, as we like to call it—being watchful of the teacher. I’m greeted by Alex’s avatar holding balloons and throwing confetti that forms a message. It’s a group message to Eric, Casey, and I. In tall black serif letters it reads:

*It was great being teammates. Let’s all go to the promotion party together after apprenticeship selection.*

“Alex, what would you say is the answer to this problem?” Mrs. Wiler inquires, pointing to the calculation on the media wall. I wonder if she knows Alex sent a message out—she’s freaky that way. Alex scribbles on his dreen, sending the equation and answer to the media wall for all to see. He figures out the problems in seconds, which is why I’m glad he’s in my class. Two thumbs up appear on my dreen from Casey and Eric. I add my own.

“Correct,” she says, disappointment dribbling from her mouth. She didn’t get to rebuke him for not paying attention. “Now prepare for positioning.” Her fingers dance along the digital display on the media wall, maneuvering our desks. My seat adjusts, allowing the footrest to appear and protect my feet from dragging. The desks move into position in an orchestrated fashion. In my mind, the desks perform Tchaikovsky’s Swan Lake, my toes tapping to music only I hear.

Once in formation, our four desks—Sabrina, Karl, Esther, and I—form one large screen that displays the first puzzle.

*Two desks are at a common point at time  $t=0$ , the first desk begins moving along a straight line at the rate of 240 feet per minute. Two minutes later, the second desk starts moving in a direction perpendicular to that of the first, at a rate of 300 feet per minute. How fast is the distance between them changing when the first desk has traveled 720 feet?*

I giggle inwardly at the thought of driving my desk three hundred feet per minute. There were a few class sessions in which Mrs. Wiler unlocked the controls that allow us to drive our own desks, but after some of my classmates decided to turn the opportunity into bumper desks, we lost that privilege.



I head over to our regular lunch table in the quad, where students from each school eat. Metal tables are scattered throughout the lunch area, reflecting the sunlight, resembling stars strewn across a sable sky. The Soshes stick to the grassy area closest to their school. And the Physos hang out near the pool, which belongs to the School of Physicality. Affects are the only group not here, since they’re transported—somehow—to Genus Voluptas to begin their apprenticeships in the arts immediately upon receiving their placement. I don’t get why they need their own genus. There isn’t much mingling with the students in the other schools. I walk toward the Cog area, smack in the center of the quad. I think it gives the best visual of everyone else around us. Invisible veggie-scented clouds excite my stomach on my way there.

In the distance, Casey is pressing her menu options—like some delicate flower—from the box hovering over the table. The box lists a menu on all four sides so students from each side of the table can order at once. I'm blinded for a moment by a glimmer from the translucent dome shield that protects our genus from genetically-modified organisms like plant seeds, harnesses the sun's energy to power our genus, and cleans the air. There is one company that controls the shield—Sustenance. I'm guessing that's where Eric will work, since the career he's been preparing for is Energy Administrator. I scored on the career assessment as a Geneticist, so wherever I go will be a company that hires geneticists.

Eric and Alex—the dynamic duo—are already taking up one side of the table, so I plunk myself down next to Casey. “What did you order?”

“Okra and fries.”

I never did enjoy okra. It's odd to me, a chili wannabe with its tapered and somewhat cylindrical form, except for its slimy texture and lack of spiciness.

I slide through the menu pages trying to figure out what I want to eat. Broccoli? Nope. Not today. After swiping through the pages, I return to page one and select garlic spinach and mashed potatoes. For a second I think I shouldn't have ordered something with garlic since I'm going to be meeting with apprenticeship recruiters. Should I cancel it? No. I like garlic. I'll just have to keep my distance from them.

Casey leans over to me, two inches too close, her chin resting on her palm, and whispers, “Is something going on between you and Eric?” Her eyes drill through mine.

I shift in my seat giving myself those two inches back. “What? No. You know he's my best friend.”

“He wasn't eyeing you as a best friend when you walked to the table.”

“I'm sure he was ogling someone just past me.”

“Who? I only ever see him with you. Is he seeing someone?”

“Not that I know of.”

Once the guys are done ordering, the menu box rises, bringing their faces into view. The square outline in the center of the table opens up

revealing our food. Eric unsnaps the cover from his plate, unveiling grilled asparagus, roasted tomatoes, and rice pilaf. The smell causes my stomach to rumble.

The serverbot arrives at our table with our glasses of water and garnishes—lemon, cucumber, and strawberry. Most days I choose cucumber, but today I figure I'll live on the wild side and choose strawberry. Sometimes I wish we had something other than water. During the inception of the Domus Council, with the struggle to ensure the survival of our species, one of their first decisions was to eliminate all substances that were detrimental to our health. Anything that could increase the risk of our extinction and leave the world to the Immundus had to go.



“I can't believe today is our last day,” Casey says, drawing an okra to her mouth.

“I can't believe it's been five years since I walked onto this campus. It's seems like two lifetimes ago,” I say.

“I'm so ready to start my apprenticeship tomorrow,” Eric chimes in.

“Not me. Did you know if one genus is short on apprentices for climatology they draw from other genres?” Alex says.

“No,” we all respond in sync.

“My advisor said I have to prepare for the possibility that I might leave.”

I glance at Casey and from her reaction, it looks like she's just learning her boyfriend might leave her. I can't believe he's telling her now, in front of Eric and me.

“Are you going to eat that or are you teasing your mouth?” Eric says.

While lost in my thoughts, my loaded fork has been hovering near my mouth. I push the food in and give a cheesy smile.

Alex, noticing Casey's face, changes the topic by recounting his favorite lunch items. We all chime in with the flavors we love, then move on to discussing the worst foods. We joke about the vomit-

inducing taste of radishes that refused to relinquish hold of our taste buds, even with the cups of water we chugged down.

Then it happens.

Casey mentions how she loves the way her mom cooks okra, with chopped sweet onion, carrots, garlic, corn, and diced tomato, a parade of color that dazzles the eyes and entertains the stomach. My mom was an excellent cook. She never cooked okra because neither my father nor I would eat it if she did. She tried once. I wasn't allowed to turn food down without trying it at least once. So I did. The moment I placed it in my mouth, its texture and taste grossed me out, causing me to propel it across the table onto my mom's plate. If she came back, I would eat okra for her. I would shove it down my throat if that would make her happy—if that would make her stay.

My heart collapses into my stomach, pulling my mind along, as it attempts to escape from the unwanted reality that hasn't changed: my mom is gone. It's been years, but I can still feel the crispness of the note in my hands. The note that changed my life. My eyes become water-filled balloons ready to burst, so I spin my head toward the farthest building, pretending to be distracted by something in the distance. I cough to keep the rush of tears from breaking through. One escapes, though, and slithers down my cheek. I pretend to scratch my cheek to wipe it away, but the thoughts keep coming, piling one on top of the other, and inevitably I think of my father. He might as well be gone, too. He started disappearing from me when my sister, Faith, died, and then when mom left, he chose to give all his time and energy to work, leaving me to fend for myself.

I feel the gentle placement of a hand on my right shoulder. Eric plants himself between me and Casey. The others are oblivious to the tears I'm holding back, but not Eric. He always seems to know. "Everything okay?"

"Yeah. Why do you ask?" I lean toward him, trying to control the sudden fluttering of my eyelashes.

"Just thought I'd check. You zoned out for a bit."

"Oh, I was just thinking about Apprenticeship Recruitment."

I don't know why I can't tell him—or any of them—the truth and admit I'm not strong, that the girl who sits before them is a façade. That beneath my all-together surface is a marred spirit, beaten into submission by one loss after another. Because I'm just a sixteen-year-old girl who wants her mom and her sister back. A girl that would give anything to have a father actually care for her . . . love her . . . want her . . . the way most fathers do.

“Thinking about whether you'll be placed with your dad? This could be your chance to get to know him, since he's always working. If you work with him, then you'll see him all the time.”

“True.” He'll be forced to talk to me if I serve as his apprentice. I hope.

The bell rings twice, alerting us that ten minutes remain for lunch. I scarf down my remaining food, say my goodbyes, and begin my trek to history class. I almost make it to my building when news holograms appear throughout the quad. “URGENCY! URGENCY! An Immundus has been sighted at the wall near Genesis. I repeat an Immundus has been sighted at the wall near Genesis. Genesis guards are on high alert. Avoid the Mission District and do not drive along the perimeter road. If you come into contact with an Immundus, initiate your alarm.”

I glance at my forearm and rub the raised patch of skin where one of my microchips lies. I wish the guard stations would stop announcing the sightings and scaring everyone. All they do is cry Immundus. Who cares if this other human species is at the wall of our genus? I only want to know if they ever make it in. And the wall surrounding Genus Guadium is too high and too thick for that to happen. At least that's what I keep telling myself. Plus, why would they bother us? We haven't bothered them.

## F O U R

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# RECRUITMENT

After Futures class, my friends and I march to Bridge, the building where our recruitment interviews will occur. All the students from the School of Cognition have to be at Bridge by 3:30 p.m.; the other schools are scheduled at different times today. I scan the herd of people for Alex, Casey, and Eric, but I don't see them. Maybe they weren't released from their classes yet. This is the first time any of us have been to Bridge, which is around a half-mile walk from our school on campus. It's a long rectangular austere building, ashen in color, with windows forming a seamless line of glass along the side of the building. We arrive at the front of the building, where there are six doors, all locked. And so we wait.

"Nia!" An audible voice, the volume of an alarm, stands out among the plethora of students talking. "Nia!" I can't make out who the voice belongs to. I stand on my tiptoes, peering over the tidal wave of faces. It's times like these I wish I was taller than five foot two.

I ask a girl from my classes, Sabrina, if she can see who's calling me, since her height gives her a better vantage point. She can't see either. The crowd begins to split, like the biblical parting of the Red Sea, as people make way for someone.

Alex's face is visible now. "Casey wanted me to ask you if you and Eric still wanted to go to the Promotion Party since there was an Immundus sighting." His voice is breathy, chest heaving, as though he had just run over here.

“Yeah, I don’t let those announcements affect what I do.”

“I do. I generally go home and lift weights on these days. I want to be prepared if one of those savages ever makes it past the wall.”

“Are you saying you guys don’t want to go?”

“No. We’ll all ride together in my car.” He rubs his hand through the top of his thick black hair. “Just hang out here after the selections.”

An announcement comes through the speakers hovering overhead, informing us to line up in front of the door corresponding to the first letter of our last name. I hadn’t noticed before but above each door are letters. The door closest to the left, where I’m standing, is A to E. Since my last name is Luna, and Alex’s last name is Sommerfield, we have to line up under different doors. As we split, he says, “I’ll flash you when I’m done.”

Once in line, a pair of hands come across my face, covering my eyes. “Guess who.”

“Eric.” He’s the only person who has ever covered my eyes. I knew he was bound to come in this line since his last name is Marcello.

“I was worried I wasn’t going to be able to find you,” he says, combing his fingers through his thick light brown hair.

“Why would that worry you?”

“Because I don’t want to get stuck sitting next to someone I don’t know.”

“So true.” I nod my head in agreement.

The doors open and we walk in. There are three long curved rows of stadium seats that belong to each door. Eric and I are assigned to sit in the front row facing the center. Across the room is a mirror set of rows, which also face the center of the room, so I can see Alex and Casey. Casey is in the front row facing us, Alex in the second. To my right are the six doors we came through. The singular adornments in the room are old crystal chandeliers, each with six tiers, providing illumination.

The flood of voices in the room grates my ears. We sit, waiting for instructions. Eric’s hands are wrestling.

“Nervous about the place you’ll get into?”

“No, I’m excited.”

Sound is vacuumed out of the space when a man and a woman enter and walk to the center of the room.

“Welcome to Apprenticeship Recruitment.” The woman’s voice high-pitched and airy. “I am Genevieve McArthur.” She looks young for being an administrator, with her long flowing auburn curls and pink lips against her porcelain skin.

“And I am Mateo Garcia,” the man says, poised, his right hand clutched at his chest while his left arm is hidden behind him.

“We are here to facilitate the interview process,” Ms. McArthur proclaims, maintaining her whimsical disposition. “There are twenty-eight interview rooms in this building labeled with numbers. In just a moment, Mateo and I will begin calling out names. When we call your name, you will come to collect your card. Your card has a schedule that lists the interview times, rooms, and employer names. It will also tell you which of the following doors you will walk through.” Ms. McArthur points to three doors along the curved wall on my left. She continues, “Most of you will visit with at least three employers. Once you have met with your final employer, you will go to Destination Hall, which is analogous to this room, except on the other side of the building. Take a gander at your seat number, and please sit in the same letter row in that room as you are now. Further instructions will be given in that room before you leave.” The mass of bodies turns to identify their numbers on the backrests of their seats.

Mr. Garcia clears his throat, and he and Ms. McArthur take turns calling names. They aren’t calling us in alphabetical order, and I begin to question why they had us sit in alphabetically-ordered rows in the first place. Alex is called. For Casey’s sake, I hope he doesn’t get assigned to a company in another genus. Casey follows a few names later.

After almost thirty minutes of waiting, my name is called. Eric squeezes my hand, and I squeeze back before making my way down. I know he’s also hoping that I get an apprenticeship with my father. From a distance, Ms. McArthur appeared young, but when I accept my card

from her, I notice her face is packed with makeup, her neck riddled with wrinkles, and her scent carrying a hint of baby powder. I'm momentarily distracted by this realization, but then I glance down at my card.

#### Door One

You have ten minutes to spend with each  
employer in the order listed below.

When time is up, move on to the next employer.

Room 1: GenTech

Room 3: Synthesis

Room 5: Codex

Room 7: Genesis

Ten minutes? How are they going to make a decision about me in ten minutes? Well, at least they made this easy enough to understand. My last interview is with Genesis, where my father works. I wonder if he's there in room seven right now.

The door to room one is open, so I walk right in. Three recruiters, a scarecrow-looking woman sandwiched between two men, all in white lab coats, are seated at a table facing me. I imagine they either came from work, are heading to work, or they're working a long shift and this is just a break in the middle of their day.

One of the men directs me to take a seat. He points to the chair right across from them. I feel my face become flush. I didn't think of it before, but I consider what will happen if no employer selects me. I've never heard of a student not getting an apprenticeship, but then again I never asked. I take my seat and shove a smile to the front of my face, determined to make them like me, or at least think me worthy of selection.

"We know you've received high scores in your classes and can do the work. We are seeking someone who will be a good fit with those of us who work at GenTech," the woman explains. "So we want to know about you as a person. Tell us about yourself."

My muscles choke my spine. Tell them about me? I thought for sure they would ask questions about what I learned. I'm ready for those. I'm

not prepared to tell them about me. What am I supposed to say? I feel a lump begin to choke off the air to my throat. Sweat begins to percolate to the surface of my palms. I place my hands on my lap, pushing the sweat into my pants and hoping no one notices. I can't tell them about me. I don't even tell my friends about me.

They sit there, with their eyes staring me down, eager to hear a response so that they can cast out the next question to reel in their candidate.

"Wow. Where to begin?" I respond with a voice an octave higher than I expected and with an intense emphasis on eye contact to create the illusion of truthfulness. I deluge them with pretenses of a cheerful life in which my father and I eat breakfast and dinner together, which he makes for me; have long talks about my future and how proud he is that I'm following his career path; and laugh together over shows that we both find interesting. I practically vomit listening to the acid-tasting words. I share lies about our father-daughter escapades to places like Rascals. Then I bring my mom up the way that hurts the least. I tell them she's dead. It's easier than telling them she left. But the moment I mention my mom, the scarecrow woman begins jotting something on her e-pad. Should I not have said that? Does she know my parents? Maybe she's writing down that I'm a liar because she knows my mom left, or that I'm sharing way too much information about my personal life. Ugh! Why didn't anyone prepare me for this? If my father actually talked to me, I could have learned what to expect.

The truths that wiggle free are about Casey, Eric, and Alex. The moment the recruiters say thank you I'm up and out the door to my next stop.



My last stop is Genesis, and I worry about how to respond to their recruiters, considering one of them might be my father, or at least know of him. My intestines play Twister with my organs, sending spasms along my spine. I open the door. One person is seated in the room—a man,

older than my father, with hair the color of festuca grass, but not as wild. The other employers had three recruiters, so I'm puzzled that there's only one person recruiting for Genesis, but relieved it's not my father. I sit down, carrying my toy smile.

"Hello, Genia. I'm Richard Charleston. I work with your father." I'm taken aback by his welcoming behavior and amiable personality. "He has told me great things about you."

*He has?* What great things have I done? Even if I had done great things, my father doesn't even know me. But I can't say that, so I shove the truth into the black pit of my heart.

"What has he told you?" I ask, entranced by what he might say.

"Well, he told me you play Spero. That's quite an obstacle course, packed with physical and mental challenges." He rubs his nose. "And received high scores in school."

He's lying. My father never asked me about my scores in school, and I doubt he cared enough to call and find out. This man probably got my scores the same way the others did. And he could have watched one of the Spero games. But I don't argue. I just keep my mask on.

"That was nice of him." I try not to let on that I think he's lying.

"Did you know we only meet with legacies?"

"Legacies?"

"We only consider the children of our employees for apprenticeship positions. Right now, there are three students ready for apprenticeships, including you. So the apprenticeship is yours . . . if you want it."

"If I want it? You mean I get a choice?" I gush, my concerns cascading into oblivion.

"Since we have three positions open and three legacies, you are all guaranteed a position." He shifts forward in his seat. "In Destination Hall, you will receive a card that lists the employers who want you to work for them. *We* will be on the card, but in the event another employer's name is on the card, you will have a choice. Not everyone gets a choice, but you and the other legacies might." He pauses for a

moment and looks squarely into my eyes. “We hope you choose us. I’m sure you can accomplish great things at Genesis.”

I feel a sudden release of tension, like a dam breaking, releasing a fury of water that settles into a placid state. At least one place for sure wants me. Mr. Charleston thanks me for my time, and I practically bounce to Destination Hall in joy, knowing that my father and I could finally get to know one another after all these years of him shutting me out.



I enter Destination Hall and take my spot. Alex and Casey are talking, both seated on the other side of the room. My forearm says 4:45 p.m. I’m excited to tell Eric my placement. I sit mute for fifteen minutes until Eric walks in.

It’s hard to contain myself. The moment Eric sits down I tell him about Genesis.

Eric smiles, his eyes piercing mine. “That’s great!” His eyes don’t pull away, though, making me a little uncomfortable.

“What? What is it?”

He slouches in his seat, staring down at his hands, and doesn’t respond.

“Did you mess up in your interviews?”

“No.”

I let out a deep sigh. “Oh good.” I grab his shoulders. “Then spit it out, Eric. There’s something you want to say. I know you.”

“Us leaving school just hit me . . . We’re going our separate ways. We won’t see each other every day anymore,” he says, scratching the back of his head.

“We’re still going to be friends. I’ll just see you after work now! And it’s another reason that we have to make the most of our time together at the party tonight . . . Which reminds me, Alex said for us to wait for him and Casey at the front of the building when we’re done here.”

A hush falls on the room as Ms. McArthur and Mr. Garcia walk in. Everyone shifts up and forward in unison, including Eric, awaiting the results.

“The Administration here at the School of Cognition is pleased with all the work you have done, and we wish you the best in your next five years of apprenticeship,” Mr. Garcia says. Screams of excitement burst from students on Alex’s side of the room. “I have but one piece of advice for you before we present your offers.” He pauses for a moment, sweeps his eyes around the hall, then says with great conviction, “Rise beyond the spires of greatness, not for you, but for the sustainability of our world and its inhabitants. Live for the future, that Earth and the life herewith may not be forgotten as though we never were, but live that we may be remembered for all you do to ensure the continuation of our species. With your help, the Homo sapiens will not only thrive now, but for years to come. Carpe posterum!”

We all stand at the conclusion of his speech, our arms crossed against our bodies, pounding our palms over the left and right side of our chest simultaneously in ceremonial fervor.

At that moment, Eric whispers, “I’m in love with you.” I hear his words, clear as the sound of rain through the prolific sound of pounding chests. I turn to him, his brown eyes radiating that same strangeness, which I now realize is love, piercing my soul, sending my thoughts caverning into confusion and shock.

I don’t respond. I can’t respond. Why is he trying to change things between us now? We sit down and the drum of palms to chest is dispelled. Eric’s eyes burn into my profile, but I dare not peek his way. He doesn’t speak—I’m sure because he knows the others will hear.

The gregarious ones in the group give a few celebratory yells, then silence falls.

I glance over at Casey, wondering if she knew. I hear her words. *Is something going on between you and Eric? He wasn’t eyeing you as a best friend.* Awkwardness encompasses my body, even as my mind stays stuck in a hurricane of thoughts.



“Nia.” Someone from behind taps my shoulder. “He called your name.” Victor, from my history class, spoke as soft as a dandelion on a gentle breeze, but louder than a lily.

“Oh!” I jump up, rushing to the center of the room. Mr. Garcia holds my card this time.

“Congratulations! You’ll be working with your dad,” he says.

“You know where my father works?”

“Yes, it’s my job to know,” he says. I freeze in my spot, waiting to hear more. Instead, he directs me to exit.

I read the card:

You have been selected to serve your apprenticeship at:

Genesis

3100 Tansomon Rd.

Please arrive promptly at 8 a.m.