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What Carries On: Drafting, Revising, and Attention to Craft in Young Adult Fiction

Briana McDonald

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Requirements for Commonwealth Honors in English

Bridgewater State University

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Kristen told me that Frank had his PhD in Technical Engineering, and that Palmer prepared for initiation for years – that he'd heard some podcast back in the day that predicted there'd be a need for Synthetic Composition Studies, and he invented the field himself. Apparently Daniel actually replaced a dog before the epidemic, for personal reasons. It short-circuited within 48 hours, but that wasn't what everyone remembered when he referenced what he'd crudely titled his Digi-Dog. Some of them were smarter than the mentors, she told me, and I shouldn't feel bad that I was teetering on the line of acceptance into the New Life Project.

I was eleven when the illness hit five years ago. My basement lab exercises and the textbooks I'd read back-to-back seemed more like hobbies than experience when compared to Frank's goddamned doctorate. I hadn't lived long enough to do things the regular way, the old way. But now, considering Frank could – just like anyone else – die at any moment, anyone with experience or knowledge in science stood a chance. The New Life Project was desperate for qualified people, in a world where half of the best minds had already died out and the other half could go at any minute.

There was a fourteen-year-old boy with blue braces (that, he'd told me, he'd never had a chance to remove after his orthodontist retired for the more practical business of nutrition pill distribution) who never shut up about his father's job at an IT manager. He was convinced his family history would propel him to the top of the list.

Kristen also played up the fact that her father used to be a computer programmer. To be fair, she knew code better than any of us. What she didn't tell the mentors was that she used to put her skills to use by hacking into her younger brother's computer as revenge for whatever antics he pulled on her that week.

Patrick's mechanical skills developed more from necessity than anything else. As his family members died out one by one, the task of keeping up the house and all of its appliances fell on his shoulders. Patrick wasn't the kind of person comfortable fending for himself; he enjoyed the protective convenience of technology. He kept the air in his house as clean and regulated as possible; he was convinced the illness was airborne, even though no medical studies revealed any evidence of this. He even kept his body protected from the world with an out-of-fashion helmet on his head and heavy clothing that covered every inch of skin from toe to neck, including thick leather gloves. Over the past five years, he'd developed a knack for technology, adding new tech cleaners as often as he could. It was impractical and fueled by paranoia, but it prepared him pretty well for the upcoming technical tests and examinations.

Patrick and Kristen could tell I was antsy. That's why Kristen was suddenly sure Frank's doctorate was a setback, assuring me that "he'd already been mentored to death and run his course in the field." Patrick, on the other hand, was far less comforting. Not because he didn't want to be, but because he sucked at it, almost as bad as I did. He was so panicked at the thought of moving on without me, I was sure he was going to vomit in his own helmet.

I'd known Patrick since the illness first hit. Patrick was one of the few kids who kept returning to school long after others dropped out. I only knew him briefly then but as more and more students and teachers failed to return, we became closer. I recognized a part of myself in him; even though he feared the illness like a child feared the dark, he didn't want to hide. Like

me, he had his heart set on The New Life Project and we'd signed up for the project together. We'd met Kristen then, around sign-up time when the Program hit our town.

Becoming part of the New Life Program wasn't originally my idea. A little over three years ago, two years after the illness first appeared, my brother Miles asked me to join him in the basement for a talk. I remember every detail of the day, though I didn't understand all of what was said until much later.

Mom had been in the living room, as always, perched in her sinking armchair with her palms placed over the armrests. I never saw her move except when she replaced the crumpled paper she had developed the useless habit of stuffing in the gaps beneath the doorframes, or to pull the shades, as if making eye-contact with illness meant contracting it. The hum of TV static filled the house between government broadcasts. I snuck past my mother and down the stairs to where my older brother was huddled in a corner by a tall, dusted bookshelf.

He was a tall, muscled boy in his mid-teens with flat, smooth blonde hair swept across his pale forehead. His lips were pursed in a familiar tight line, his brow knotted together, his hands held tightly in front of him, fingers overlapping fingers. I was around twelve at the time. Failed tests on the illness (untraceable beyond the tell-tale rash on the back of the victim's neck), continued to disappoint. At the time, I hadn't noticed the difference but Miles paid close attention, even at his young age of fifteen.

"Listen, Emma," he said, leaning towards me. "We have a lot to think about right now. You may not understand all I have to say, but you have to listen and remember for when you're old enough to get it. Okay?"

Miles often talked to me like that, as though he was more of an adult than I'd ever be. When we were children, he'd have to drag me away from fights in the schoolyard, or keep me

from running around our pool, or rescue me if I'd climbed too high into a tree. Jane, our younger sister, was much more docile, and had never given him trouble. He was always lecturing me as if he were the parent and I were the child. I would pull at his short hair or tug at his sleeves, crying, "you're a kid, too!" He'd always tell me, "everyone is an adult compared to you, Emma."

So when he called me down and told me he had something to say that I wouldn't understand, I figured he was about to lecture me about spilling Jane's paint when I'd kicked my ball inside the house. But though his tone took on the sharp edge it did just before a lecture, the way he placed his arm around my shoulder like a comforting blanket told me that something was different this time.

"I have an idea of what we can both do to with our time left," he said.

"Our time left where? In school?" I stretched my legs out in front of me. "No one else goes anymore. I don't wanna go anymore, either!"

"I meant our time left here. Healthy."

Two years before that moment, a fifteen-year-old would have been more concerned about his acne or his junior prom date than something like this. I knew that now but at the time, I didn't know how to take his words. I'd sunk into his chest and stared at the dirt smudge on my white shoelace, silent. Looking back now, the scene is more haunting than any other. More than watching him leave to the empty gym day by day, training to join the military. More haunting than when he finally did depart, his back to me as I watched him leave me behind. Because even though I was curled into his warmth, and even though he was talking about the future, and even though he was so young that his voice still cracked when he spoke, he was talking like he was a time bomb, ready to explode at any moment.

At the time, I hadn't understood any of this, though. The word healthy was all I'd picked up on. "You know what the cure is?"

"I don't know what the cure is," Miles said. "No one knows what it is, because there isn't one."

I lowered my head and began to tug at a wavy strand of hair, focusing my attention on the lonely curl. "Oh."

The timeline is a lot clearer in retrospect. In those days, I only caught parts of the news on the television, only vaguely understood that out there, somewhere in the world, the country's brightest were looking for a cure and running tests I didn't understand. I had full confidence that the professionals would fix it. He'd been old enough to understand and predict what was happening. He saw the repetition of failed studies and interpreted the government's months of prolonged silence as confirmation of their failure.

And he'd been planning our futures the entire time. He'd been deciding how we would live in this world, and what the next step would be.

"Listen, Emma," he said. "Our cure is productivity. As long as we are productive with the last of our time and do something with our abilities before the illness catches up to us, then we're one step ahead of all the others."

I tilted my head against his shoulder and stared across the room where an old, empty rat trap was laid out. "Do you mean I have to get a job?"

He shifted. "I mean, sort of--"

"But even Mom quit her job," I said, "and she stays at home now. I'm a kid. If she quit her job, why--"

“Because you’re not like her, Emma.” He turned toward me. “You’re never content to sit inside, not like Mom or Jane. You’re always running through the streets and making up your own games, keeping yourself busy. And you’re always willing to jump into the middle of an issue. I used to spend most of my recess dragging you off from fights with other kids.” He chuckled, and I straightened my shoulders proudly. “You’re going to have those traits as an adult too. It’s part of your nature, no matter what the world is like now. Tell me, can you imagine living in this house if it was all locked up, and you couldn’t leave anymore? If you had to sit inside until you died, spending your days dusting the living room and staring at the walls?”

I shrunk back. “No!”

A smile formed on his lips. “Me either. But because of what’s happening these days, people try to hoard their minutes by locking themselves inside. Mom is planning on having the house closed someday. When she does, neither of us will be here. Okay?”

Closed houses. It involved more than just jamming the windows shut and filling in the cracks below the door. It involved turning the house into a box, a box where a glass wall stands where the door once did, offering nothing more than a view of the world it locks out. There is nothing worse to me than a closed house.

“We’re going to be useful,” he said. “We’re going to get out of this town, and travel, and be the people who change the whole world, for the better.”

These words set both my body and mind into motion. I tugged at the edge of his shirt. “How? How?”

He brushed a hand through my thick, curly hair until it slid down and rested firmly on my shoulder. “Me and you have to be smart and study hard,” he told me, “and keep our ears open.

We have to do what the government wants, so they'll fund us to travel across the country and give us important jobs."

"I just have to be smart?" I asked.

"Study science," he advised me, his head bent down towards me. "That's what they want. They want scientists who can fix this situation. That's what you'll need to be."

"A scientist? Like in *A Wrinkle in Time*?"

"I'm not talking about fiction." He shifted so his shoulder blocked my shelf. "I know you love to read, but that's not going to get you anywhere in this new world. You need to stop reading novels and read scientific instruction text books. If you keep reading what you do now, you'll never leave this basement. Science is your ticket out of here, and your only shot at living."

I stared over his shoulder at my shelf. Suddenly, my older brother said I couldn't read anymore. I had to rewire my brain if I wanted to make anything of myself in this new world. Tears burned at the back of my eyes and I averted my gaze, blinking them away.

"And what about you?" I asked. "What are you going to do?"

"I'm a bit too old to get smart about science now," he said, patting my shoulder stiffly, "but I have talent of my own that the government will want. I'm going to leave soon, Emma. I haven't told Mom or Jane yet, but I'm going to be joining the military."

My small fists clasped around the buttons of his shirt. "Don't go!"

"You're going to grow up faster than you think and you'll leave soon, too, and find me. I'm sure you will. You're the most stubborn person I know, and once you set your mind to your studies, I know you'll be brilliant."

I clenched my small fists in front of me, my heart hammering in my chest.

“What about me?” a voice came from the darkness. The sound of small feet pattering down the stairs echoed through the basement as Jane stumbled toward us. Miles let out a sigh and I glanced over my shoulder at my young sister, a small brunette with the same blue eyes as Miles. “Can I come?”

Miles thought for a moment before saying, “You need to stay here and watch after Mom. That’s the most important job of all, isn’t it?” Perhaps Miles predicted that Jane would be more docile and patient than I was, even at her young age. But looking back, it was probably that he didn’t know what to do with her, our baby sister.

She wobbled towards us, flinging her arms around my neck as she reached me. “Don’t go, Emma!”

“She’s not going anywhere for a while yet,” Miles said.

Jane nuzzled her plump face into my neck as I stared up at my older brother. His words had been scary to me, even back then, but empowering, too. I was stubborn enough to do it, so I could. And I would. I wasn’t going to let Miles do all the work himself.

It wasn’t as though I wasn’t qualified on some level, but my specialty was a bit more abstract. Professor Dummit once noted that I was “quick on my feet” when we hit a dead-end or a roadblock in our research, and always a good critical thinker when it came to solving problems. I would close my eyes and envision what the world would look like if future played out the way people on the screen predicted or requested. I’d flip through the wrinkled pages of my favorite books to find clues, stumbling on images of possible futures in the pages of old texts. One of the largest debates in The New Life Project echoed in the pages of *Tale of Two Cities* or *Brave New World*. Should we make both AIs and RCs, should we give AIs the knowledge to build RCs if they see fit, or should we scrap the idea of RCs altogether? While some members of the New

Life Project opposed the idea of Remote Controlled beings altogether, saying it was nothing but a way to ensure a binary class structure in the new world, others argued that a mixture of both would be most efficient, as RCs could be programmed to carry out specific tasks needed in the future and would never realize the limits of their abilities.

Patrick and Kristen rarely thought beyond the work in front of them, while I enjoyed studying the consequences and finding the reasons behind each of our actions. There were so many critical and ethical questions that went into each decision we made. I knew there was a place for my knowledge and abilities, but it was a difficult skill to describe to the mentors. This was now truer than ever as we approached the final tests, which would determine who would remain in this dying city and who would carry on with New Life.

It's at least a forty-minute walk to the University from my home. My city is – still – separated into three distinct areas: the South, West, and Central. South is basically non-existent now; it used to be the poorer version of the West suburbs, with narrow houses where children in the past could toss a tennis ball back and forth through windows from one house to another. West was considered the richer part of town. When the illness set in and hit our town, it should have changed all of that – death should have been the equalizer. But it wasn't. Southies became the Wanderers of Central's streets, unable to purchase nutrition pills or other means of survival in this decaying world. Westies could afford ordered a lifetime supply of pills. The divide held its power.

Patrick attributes his family's extinction to the cramped nature of the area. "I swear, it was because we were Southies," he'd tell me, referring to his over-stuffed household of two parents, grandparents, and three younger siblings. "Even before the illness if a neighbor coughed, my Dad would be coughing within the next five minutes. That's why I started to wear this helmet," he'd concluded, giving it a tap. "I made Maggie a mask out of dishrags, Piper used earplugs in her nose, and Stephen tied rubber bands, attached to a cup, around his ears. The helmet was the only thing that did its job, though." And with that he'd fall quiet and wouldn't mention Southside for a week.

Central was as crowded as usual as I headed to the University, my hands tucked firmly into the pockets of my unzipped jacket, my heeled boots smacking against the damp, crumbling

gravel beneath them. My old mailman Mike's truck was up ahead. I found him dead last week, hunched halfway into the driver's side of his car. I passed him again, and again, and again, his back always facing me, a reminder that when people left, they vanished – vanished within a second, crawling into their cars in the midst of a daily routine. No one would have moved him if he hadn't been delivering anything besides nutrition pills. But once word got out that a truckload of them sat on the side of the road, waiting for takers, his grave became a hotspot. Starving Wanderers from the central part of the city rummaged through the back of his truck, grabbing as many boxes as they could find. News travels slow these days, but eventually the government heard that another one of their workers passed on the job. Cleaners were sent through. The truck itself was left, but Mike was hauled to the graveyard on Park St.

Once I saw an older man, probably in his sixties, standing behind a fold-out table with five tomatoes and a handful of green beans on it. I stopped in my tracks at the sight of him; I hadn't seen anything like it in years. After the death rate spiked, things like farms, factories and transportation had been replaced with government-issued nutrition pills. There simply weren't enough workers to pick vegetables and fruits, to run farms and cut meat, to drive trucks across the country and to run supermarkets. The thought of eating a tomato made my stomach twist and curl. I darted past him without another glance.

The man wasn't there as I walked toward the University the final week of the apprenticeship. Kristen was up ahead, leaning against a brick building poking a pillow with the tip of her toe. There was a whole pile of pillows around her. I rushed forward and leapt over the pillows to reach Kristen.

A broad smirk slid across her hollow cheeks as I approached. "It's the big day, Emma!"

“What the hell is with the pillows?” I asked, waving my hand at the pile surrounding her. “Are you planning on making us a home here if we don’t get accepted?”

“Nah, I can’t take credit for this,” she laughed. She pointed her thumb upward, toward one of the windows above her. “Someone is still living above the laundromat, and they’re tossing all their extra pillows out into the street.”

Litter Charity was one of my least favorite parts of visiting Central. People were constantly dumping their garbage into the streets, anything from cracked flower vases and old stereos to unused rolls of toilet paper and coin collections. Usually people carried them out to the sidewalk and sometimes, our eyes would meet. I’d hear the same reasoning each time: “You never know; *someone* might find a use for it.”

It was a like a constant yard sale where the owner’s profit was freeing their house of old memories or clutter. For the recipients of the trash, it was either a sidewalk hindrance or a hoarder’s wet dream.

I had difficulty swallowing the word charity. One time a man threw out a collection of old cable and internet chords. The next day, I’d passed a familiar Wanderer dangling from an abandoned shop sign; he hung himself by the chords. I pushed the Wanderer’s dangling legs out of my way like a low-hanging branch on my way to University.

Patrick always loved it, though. Whenever we passed piles of junks he’d slow up and sometimes, he’d take their trash as though he’d found some sort of treasure. He fixed up old, broken appliances, even things like toasters, house phones, heated fish tanks. His house was like a museum, full of half-working, fully-useless articles from a past world.

“If we don’t end up passing the tests, I’ll bring my own pillow and we can find a nicer place to stay,” I said, staring down. One of the pillows had landed directly in a puddle.

“We won’t be living in your basement?” Kristen asked with a wink.

“You know my Mom is having the house permanently closed soon. When that happens, I plan on being far away.” I stared at the tinted windows of the laundromat. “Is Patrick hiding inside?”

“Of course he is,” Kristen said. “He whined the whole way over about Central’s lack of ClariStations. If we do end up as Wanderers after this week, he’ll probably make us live in one.”

ClariStations were, in my opinion, one of the strangest parts of town. They stood at the ends of streets where bus stops once were, relics from a short-lived era when the government was unified in its goal to prevent the spread of the illness before they could find a cure. Assuming the illness could be spread through contact, these clear glass rooms were erected across the nation, especially in richer neighborhoods. They used to be insanely popular before the illness was declared untraceable and the idea that it was spread through contact died out. I’d even used them for a while. Mom would tell me I was forbidden to play outside, but there was nothing more I hated than being trapped in the house. We’d made an agreement that I could go out, so long as I remained in a ClariStation. She didn’t want me bringing germs back into the house, after all. I’d run down the street, holding my breath most of the way, until I reached the Station. I’d sit inside, holding my legs to my chest, and watch the sun set over the empty streets.

Once everyone knew ClariStations didn’t work, I was free to roam the streets again, my risk of dying the same either way. Some still clung onto the ClariStations, lingering inside of them in the hope that they did have some saving power. They’d ignore the corpses they occasionally found inside of them, claiming the person came in contaminated. My Mom was the kind of person who would live in a ClariStation, if she could. By having the house closed, she basically was.

I stepped past Kristen and shoved my way into the old laundromat, the glass door jingling as I tossed it open. Sure enough, Patrick was standing inside, back in the shadows by a row of driers, his helmet in place.

“Come on, Patrick,” I said.

“There were even more corpses than usual this morning. I counted,” he said. An incessant chiming filled the background. Kristen was rattling the door. “I didn’t want to wait outside. Is that so bad?”

I rolled my eyes. With the passing of each of his siblings, Patrick had grown more and more paranoid. “Don’t you ever keep up on politics, Patrick? No one believes it’s spread through contact anymore, unless you’re part of The Children’s Movement!” The Children’s Movement was a separate division of the government, set on finding a cure despite endless studies with no progress. Their only offense wasn’t wasting time and energy, though; they were known for their unorthodox, controversial testing. More often than not, new members of the movement were used as test subjects rather than workers. Thankfully, we didn’t see much of them in our city, other than a small recruitment stand run by a pimply teen I referred to as Wide-Mouthed Tony.

As the jingling picked up speed, I spun around to face Kristen. “I’m going to suffocate you with one of those pillows if you don’t stop!” I cried, darting after her.

“Wait!” Patrick hurried after me at my heels, smashing into my back as I came to a dead halt in the doorway. A set of couch cushions was spiraling out of the above window.

I let out a low grunt. “I can’t wait to get the hell out of this city,” I spat under my breath, balling my fists by my sides as I led the way.

Kristen walked with her hands behind her head, while Patrick held his defensively by his sides and walked beside me. “So, what are you guys most nervous about?”

“I think it’s safe to say that Patrick is scared he won’t make it to the end of the week,” I teased.

“It’s not like that doesn’t play a big part in this!” he said. “We have about a fourth of the applicants we had a year ago.”

Kristen suppressed a laugh and we braced ourselves. “I guess the competition killed them,” she said. Patrick and I let out a collective sigh.

“In all honesty, I’m not as nervous as I should be,” she admitted after a moment. “I think we have a leg-up because we’re not old farts.”

“We know Patrick’s got an automatic in,” I said. Patrick stared down and let and let out a *huh* that echoed in his helmet. “Professor Winthrop *loves* you!”

“Yeah, he looks at you like you’re the next coming of Christ or some shit,” Kristen said. “The only reason the mentors even know my name is because they have to constantly remind me to stay still in the lab.”

“I’m not better than either of you guys,” Patrick said earnestly, “and if they don’t pick either of you, the program will suffer for it.”

“Aw, touching,” I cooed, though I couldn’t help but smile.

“I’m most nervous about the written portion myself,” Patrick said. “I know it’s going to be more of an evaluation of our political views and not our lab skills. I know they *want* me to rattle on about how there’s no possibility of a cure, but I still believe it can be spread!”

“If you’re going to be so old-fashioned, why don’t you insist you want to write it in longhand cursive on looseleaf paper, too?”

“I’m being honest!” Patrick sighed.

“I’m just going to wing the written portion,” Kristen said. “I’m smooth with my words. By the time I’m done with that section, they’ll wish it were the old days so they could put a ring on my finger and build me a luxury cabin in Maine.”

I had just as little faith in Kristen’s plan as I had in Patrick’s. “That portion will be more important than you guys think.”

“Come on, you can’t be much of a writer yourself,” Kristen said.

Part of me was proud I’d fooled her so well. A smaller part of me, tucked away by the bookshelf in my basement, felt a pang at her words. “You’d be surprised!” I said, puffing my chest. “I’ve read more novels than both of you combined!”

Kristen raised an eyebrow. “Novels as in fiction? Like that’ll do you any good!”

Miles words echoed in my mind. I had to block out that old me. I cleared my throat. “I can be to-the-point and tell them just what they want to hear, unlike Patrick over here. I’ll talk about how the illness is undefinable and how there’s no possibility of a cure. How hard is that? From any research that was done, that’s been true. There’s no physical evidence of it other than a neck rash and a heap of bodies.”

“Nana tells me it’s not random, too,” Kristen piped up. “She says God is smiting bad-doers. Tommy’s always asking her why she doesn’t get rid of all her old kitchen supplies, and she says – while waving an old metal spatula at me, I might add – ‘until God gets to you two ungrateful rascals, I’ve got to keep you in line!’ Johnny usually goes crying up to his room, but I find it downright hilarious.”

The foot traffic calmed as we passed by the rows of empty storefronts eventually reached a small park, planted by a hill that led to the University’s labs. Other than the professors that

occupied the labs and surveyed the applicants, the campus was basically deserted. I'd heard that one professor, an expert in Shakespeare, continued lecturing to empty rooms for months after students stopped returning. He only stopped when he died. Kristen said he was no better than a broken wind-up toy. Secretly, I both admired and mourned him.

Entering the University each week for the past year with Patrick and Kristen had almost felt like being a college student. I'd envision that I was accepted to college to study English, not Robotics. I'd marry and raise a herd of children that had my same, curly hair. Miles and Jane, along with all my little nieces and nephews, would visit on the weekends and I'd spend my nights on the porch with my spouse, discussing something great about our lives and our futures or – even better – something mundane like the weather or what a friend wore to dinner that night. Occasionally, Patrick and Kristen would come through with their families for a visit. We'd go to a restaurant and catch up, sipping tall glasses of wine as we waited for our garnished meals to appear before us, warm from the oven.

But then, in the midst of this daydream, a lab partner would throw out some phrase like “epidemic” or “new life” and shake me back to reality. My eyes would drift out the window, to the overgrown grass and tangled tree branches. I'd taste the corrosion and garbage, become acutely aware of the professors hovering with their clipboards. They weren't deciding my GPA. They were deciding if I'd become part of the New Life Project or part of the heavy stench that blanketed my dying city.

But the thought of being a college student, of living, was like trying on an old sweater. The routine of attending University and heading out with specific, purpose made me feel like nothing had changed or, at least, while the world had changed, I had somehow snuck through a loophole.

Within five minutes we were on a secluded path, overcome with overgrown weeds and grass that erupted from every crack and twist in the un-mowed path. At the top of the hill was the University. The building's slanted side faced us, and nearly every shade was drawn from within, lights off.

“Here goes,” Patrick said.

“Do or die,” I said.

We stepped inside.

I hovered around a lab table with Patrick, Kristen, staring at an automatic floor-cleaning RC. Our other two partners were Daniel “Digi-Dog” and a middle-aged woman whose health alone brought her to this final stage.

“If it’s already put together, then what is the test?” Digi-Dog asked, his voice booming as always.

“I’m sure the mentors will tell us,” I said. “That’s their job, isn’t it?” I had little patience for the guy who had electronically reincarnated his dog for two days before it short-circuited and hadn’t stopped bragging about it for a whole year.

“Maybe the government has announced that we’re going to make a whole race of cleaner RCs,” Patrick said, his voice rising as he spoke. “I can see it now, RCs whizzing across the cities, picking up the mess we made when we left. Maybe they’ll even find and wipe out the illness!”

“Or maybe it’s some convoluted metaphor,” Kristen said, “and the mentors are trying to tell us that we’re no more useful than outdated household appliances.”

“I don’t care,” the older woman said, running a hand through her thinning bob. “I just want to be transported to the Capitol. My son lives there, you know. My last son, that is. He said if I make it through this program, I’ll be sent right to him on a fancy train and we’ll go to a specialty nutrition pill shop and eat flavored pills together! I’ve been craving butterscotch.”

This was the same speech she gave anytime she saw an opportunity to give it. I had just as little patience for people who pined for the past as I did people who made shitty electronic dogs and never shut up about it.

“Well, there’s going to be a lot more going on in Central than butterscotch flavored pills,” I said without looking up.

Patrick pressed his foot onto mine beneath the table and cleared his throat, saying, “I bet you’d like a store like that, Emma. You’re always talking about how much you miss peanut butter.”

“Peanut butter is just as much an experience as it is a taste, Patrick,” I snapped. “A pill won’t do the trick. Can we just focus on the project?”

“Here comes Professor Winthrop now,” Patrick said.

Professor Winthrop was the oldest of our mentors. The illness dragged him out of retirement and back to the lab. With no introduction or greeting, Professor Winthrop asked, “What is this robot missing?”

“Arms and legs,” Digi-Dog sputtered. We all stared silently before turning back to Winthrop.

He let out a tired sigh. “It’s not meant to resemble anything living. It is a cleaning device. What is it missing?”

“We haven’t had a chance to look inside yet, sir,” Patrick said. “We weren’t sure what we should be doing-”

“You don’t have to look inside,” he said. He pressed his fingers against his wrinkled forehead. “Use common sense. What does this need in order to operate as a finished product?” I gripped the edge of the table, squinting at the machine in front of me.

“Is it empty on the inside?” Butterscotch asked in her shrill voice. Winthrop didn’t bother responding.

That’s when I saw it. On the side of the machine was a small switch. It was flicked on, yet the machine was silent and unmoving. “It doesn’t have a power source,” I said.

“The girl in the black jacket is correct,” Winthrop said.

“Emma Bloom,” I interjected.

“Well, you’re right,” he said. “So your task is to figure out which type of power source would be most effective for this model. Go.”

“A debate!” I cried. Digi-Dog let out a moan and sat back down.

“Well, I think plugs are out of the question,” Patrick began, tapping his fingers on the edge of the table. “If all the robots in the world get chords tangled, there’s no point in making a new generation.”

“Perhaps a battery?” I offered. “Most robots run on battery.”

“But they’d have to change it, like, all the time,” Kristen said. “Imagine if you needed to change a freaking battery every day. Like, you’re about to go up a flight of stairs with your friends and you have to be like ‘nah, man, hold up, I’m running low on battery.’ And they have to sit there waiting until you find one, open up your damn insides and plug it in!”

“Robots don’t have friends,” Patrick said.

“Robots do too have friends. My electronic dog was one of the best friends I had, while he lasted.”

“Charles, my son – he never had many friends, either.”

“We basically change our batteries now, don’t we?” I said. “We have to swallow a nutrition pill every day to survive. We need sleep, too, to recharge. Maybe this thing can run on

battery during the day and charge at night?” Digi-Dog slammed his head down onto the table. “These are actual questions you’ll have to think about when you’re working on the project.”

“Yeah, well, I’m just going to be quiet and take orders,” he said. “I was able to build a robot all by myself, before I even started this project. I think I’ll be fine in the Capitol just grinding away in the lab, thank you.”

“Then you’re no better than a robot yourself!” I snapped, ignoring Patrick’s frantic stomping on my foot.

“I remember the good old days, when life was charged by hamburgers,” Kristen said. “The world was a better place. I want us to create a world where everything is once again charged by eating hamburgers.”

Butterscotch paused. “Where does electricity come from again?”

I turned my attention back to Patrick. “So do you think it could work?”

“Charging it like we would a laptop back in the day? Yeah, I think it makes sense.”

“Then it’s settled?” Kristen asked, looking up. “We’re done talking now?”

“Are you done over here?” Winthrop asked. His quiet companion, Professor Dummit, paused in his silent rounds and focused his attention on our group alongside Winthrop.

Digi-Dog leapt to his feet, his arms held tightly by his sides. “We decided that we would power it by battery during the day and have them recharge at night, sir!”

I glared at him, wishing I could leap over the table and knock him over. “That was my idea, Professor!” I blurted out, my eyes burning into Digi-Dog.

“I figured as much,” Winthrop said.

I blinked. “Really?”

“Yes. Because there’s a gaping hole in your theory.” His voice grew coarser as he spoke. “Robots don’t sleep, for God’s sake. They’ll have perfect night vision and no reason to retire. Why did you decide they should recharge at night? What if night is a time of high productivity for them?” He let out a huff and stomped off again. Dummit, however, lingered behind and continued to watch our table from a distance.

“Thanks for standing up for yourself, Emma,” Digi-Dog said with a wink. “I appreciate it.”

I closed my eyes, trying to block out the people around me. How could it generate its own power? Through the movement of its gears? But it would need power in the first place to get the gears moving. That’s why electricity is generated through natural movement, like water, or coal, or wind, or steam. Could we fuel them with either of those? What about fuel? What if we ran them like a car? That would kill the environment, though. Would that matter in the future? I couldn’t remember many environmental debates from the news. Perhaps people assumed that was a human sin, and not a concern for the New Life.

“Solar power?” I murmured, too desperate to be the first one to speak to pause to think it through.

“But then they really would get drained at night, or during winter, right?” Kristen said. “Plus, how the hell are we going to make them so they absorb solar power? They can’t look like us if they have solar panels in place of skin.”

“Are we thinking too much?” Patrick asked. “Aren’t we just supposed to figure out how to move this cleaner?”

“We make the whole world a solar powered highway,” Digi-Dog suggested.

I needed everyone to be quiet. I needed to think. What would the experts say? What was Dr. Beckson, the head of this project, using to power his designs?

“It doesn’t matter,” I said. Everyone looked up, falling silent. “It doesn’t matter what we decide. They’ll evolve, using the knowledge on power we give them, and choose what is best. Our duty is to give them a stable enough power source to last them until then. We used batteries and electricity for robots now. I say we charge them the same as ever, and let them chose what they prefer.”

“It’s just like Charles,” Butterscotch said. “I would feed him my favorite foods when he was young, but eventually he found his own.”

Kristen’s eyes widened and she gave a slow clap. “That was uncharacteristically relevant!”

Patrick nodded out to Winthrop. “Emma finalized our idea,” Patrick said.

I straightened my posture and cleared my throat. “We should use lead-acid batteries, just as we have for robots in the past. They can upgrade once they use the knowledge we pass on and develop a more efficient plan. At the time being, this is our best option, as we know it will work. It’s not worth trying out something new or untested material, giving our limited time.”

“Another group over there said we should build RCs that dig for fuel that can power AIs,” Winthrop said. “How do you reply to that?”

Kristen crossed her arms. “Slavery sucks!”

“Computers don’t know they’re slaves!” a call came from our neighboring table.

“If we power New Life by battery, some may have better access to batteries than others, just like we do with nutrition pills now,” Winthrop said. “This will ensure the future has the same power structure we have: those who have, and those who don’t. What do you say to that?”

“Can you just tell us if we passed this test or not?” Kristen asked.

“We can’t prescribe human values like that onto a whole new race of beings. Someone will have to make the batteries anyhow, and it will probably be a series of RCs made specifically for the task.” I squared my shoulders. “Besides, I say the lab is a place for practicality, and we should leave the ethical debates to the politicians and the philosophers.”

Winthrop straightened his tie, brushing his palm against the pilling fabric. “Dr. Beckson has decided on this route himself, and all procedures in the Capitol will be using batteries as a main source of power.” Our neighboring table let out a groan while Patrick wrapped his arm around me and squeezed and Kristen high-fived me across the table. Professor Dummit, who I’d almost forgotten about, shuffled on his feet and shot a smile in our direction.

“Does this mean I can see my son?” Butterscotch asked.

“It means the first lab test is over,” Winthrop said, “and that this table has passed, and the competing table is out of the running.” A small gasp came from the other table, followed by the beginning of an objection that Winthrop cut off, saying, “At this stage, there is no more time for wrong answers and those who give them. This application program has gone on long enough, and the Capitol needs the best we can offer right now. For the students moving forward, we will begin the lab testing immediately, followed by personal evaluations and on the final day, the written examination. Leave behind the cleaning RCs and go.”

Feeling confident in my chances, I walked out of the lab. I wished Miles could see me now, see that all of our debates and critical thinking exercises paid off. Winthrop had called me Bloom – he acknowledged that I had a name. Perhaps I stood a chance, after all.

Kristen spun in her wheelie chair, purposefully knocking her heels against Digi-Dog with each swing. Patrick leaned over the desk, staring at the computer parts laid out in front of him. I watched Professor Winthrop as he whispered amongst the other mentors, waiting to tell us what our task was. It was time for the technical test.

I didn't want to fail Miles' expectations but unlike Kristen, I never had unlimited access to books on code my whole life, and unlike Patrick I didn't have an inherent knack for technical or mechanical work. I relied on nothing but the skills I'd developed through reading. I tried to read as many scientific books as I could, but a good handful of my books ended up being philosophical, political or, more frequently than I'd like to admit, fictional. I'd read the hell out of everything I could get my hands on, but I wasn't sure how this was going to help me with this test.

We'd watched a whole table vanish from the program, mouths agape and eyes watering. The mentors wanted reasons to deny applicants. I could easily be next.

A hand fell on my shoulder. Patrick stood behind me. "I'll be fine," I said.

"If you even have to say that, it means you're unsure." He gave my shoulder a tug so I faced him. "Just stick by me, and follow whatever I'm doing."

"It's a bit difficult to do that discreetly if I can't see your expression." I reached up to tap his helmet and he swatted my hand away.

“You’re not dumb. You’ve been in the same classes as me all year. You should know this stuff by now.”

“Was that supposed to be comforting?”

He returned the playful shove. “You’ll do fine. Better than half the people here, at least. Look at all of these bozos.” He gestured around the room, his gloved, pointed finger lingering on Digi-Dog. “You’re brilliant compared to them!”

“Digi-Dog may be a jerk, but he knows his shit,” I said. “Even Metal Mouth has come a far way. If anyone here didn’t stand a chance, they would’ve been kicked a while ago. They’re all washcloths, Patrick. They just absorb everything they’re told and give it right back when they’re wrung out by the mentors. My brain just doesn’t work like that.” I pointed to the side of my head. “That would make my life too easy. I have to overthink and analyze and critique and understand every detail and every angle until I actually understand something. Because my brain is so freaking difficult.”

“I agree that your brain is a bit messed up, but perhaps not for the reasons you think.” I could almost hear his concealed smirk. “Your way of thinking has its merits, Emma. I’m sure it’ll come in handy here some way or another. Besides, you’re not the bottom of the barrel like you think you are. There are people here who are facing slimmer odds than you.” He nodded toward Carol. She was at the end of our table, silently fiddling with a loose button on her sweater.

“So I’m a step up from a near-senile old woman. Your confidence in me is truly comforting, Patrick.”

“Quit searching for a reason to complain and get in a testing mindset,” he said, turning from me. “We’re going to begin soon.”

The table before us was filled with half a dozen knick knacks I couldn't remember the names of. I tried to piece them together in my mind: were they supposed to make a computer, or a robotic part? My cheeks were burning. I couldn't fail this. I couldn't let someone like Digi-Dog do better than me.

Winthrop came over and dumped another RC cleaner in front of us. "This one has a battery charger," he said, "but still won't work when switched on. Figure out what isn't working and fix it. You have twenty minutes."

Kristen leapt out of her chair and rushed over to our table. Digi-Dog nearly pummeled her as he shoved past, racing to be the first to take hold of the RC.

"I built one before!" he cried. "I built a dog! Let me do it!"

I snatched the RC up and passed it to Patrick, who held it above his head, out of Digi-Dog's reach. "We're going to do this as a team, remember? We're still in group processing."

"That doesn't mean they're not looking at us as individuals!" he snapped. "You know they are. They want to see how we work as a team but secretly, they're trying to figure out who they can weed out."

I glared at him over the table. "If you suck at teamwork, you'll be the first to go!"

"This coming from you!"

"Enough arguing!" Patrick lowered the RC onto the table, though he didn't release his hands from its metallic surface. "We only have twenty minutes. Wasting it like this won't impress the mentors."

Averting my gaze from Digi-Dog, I focused on the RC. "I say we take it apart and see if anything is missing, and then check for damage on the interior parts."

Digi-Dog gripped the RC, yanking it toward him. "I can do it!"

Patrick sighed. “You need a screwdriver for that, Daniel.” He let out a huff and released the RC. Scanning the table, I snatched up a screwdriver and passed it to Patrick. “Wrong size, Emma,” he said, just after I shot a gloating smile at Digi-Dog. He let out a haughty laugh.

Kristen patted my back, reaching past me to hand Patrick the correct screwdriver. Heat rose to my cheeks.

“This should be easy enough since it’s an RC,” Patrick said. “There’s only so much that can go wrong with a pre-programmed robot.”

“I should still check its programming though, right?” Kristen asked. “Give me the effectors.”

“I’ll check the button sensors on its bumpers,” Digi-Dog offered. “Maybe it’s just struggling to operate correctly because it can’t sense its surroundings. No one wants a vacuum RC that can’t do that.”

I imagined the small RC whirring across a dirty rug at top speed until it hit a corner. Unable to sense its surroundings, it remained trap there, whirring its engines and wheels as it continued to ram itself against the wall. We had barely begun and I was already empathizing with the damn RC.

“I’ll check the actuators,” Patrick said. “Emma, you can...um, make sure the inner mechanisms are operating correctly.”

At least I’d look busy.

“What about me?” Butterscotch was leaning over her corner of the table, her wrinkled hands clasping its edge. “Don’t go pampering me just because I’m an old lady!”

Patrick paused, then nodded. “You can check the wheels if you’re like, Carol. Make sure there’s no motor issues that are preventing it from moving.” She rubbed her hands together and beamed.

Patrick unscrewed the bottom of the RC so its belly was exposed to the world. Wires, wheels, and metallic innards stared out at us, shining under the glow of the overhead light.

Why couldn’t I remember the names for half of these parts? I felt like all I’d done is read for the past four years, yet I was somehow completely unprepared for this moment.

Patrick dissected the RC and divvied up the parts, handing the microcontroller to Kristen. She darted off to one of the desktop computers to hook it up. He handed the shell of the RC to Digi-Dog, who began analyzing its sensors along its red surface. The inner parts sat between Patrick and I, a series of wires and clunky parts connected to an oversized battery.

“Maybe the battery is dead?” I suggested, hopeful.

Patrick sighed, his breath fogging the screen of his helmet. “Just concentrate on the mechanics, Emma. Make sure the structure is all right.”

“Yeah. I can do that.” Hopefully.

Digi-Dog ran his hands across the RC’s sensors, squinting at the details. Behind me, I heard Kristen’s fingers tapping against a keyboard. Patrick and I hovered over the RC side by side. I couldn’t notice any issues with the mechanics of the robot, but I was somehow sure that this was where the problem was. It was the simplest part, and I couldn’t find any issues. So obviously, I was overlooking something. It had to be me. I had to be the one screwing up.

“Emma, this is a bit small for me to work with,” Patrick said, holding up his large, gloved hands. “Can you take out the brushed RC servo so I can make sure its operating

correctly?” When I gave him a look of horror mingled with annoyance, he specified, “It’s the blackish cylinder thingy.”

My heart fluttered when I spotted it, but my excitement didn’t last long. “...How do I get it out?”

His shoulders fell. Glancing at the clock, he said in a pressed tone, “I guess I can take off my gloves, this one time.”

My hands were beginning to tremble. Despite how many corpses I passed on my daily commute, a mere test sent me into a state of jittery anxiety.

“If Winthrop comes over, say it was my idea.”

“Emma, please...”

I looked bad. Even Patrick was disappointed. I had ruled everyone’s asses in the critical examination, but was as useless as the broken RC this time around.

“Jeez, I could use an extra pair of eyes over here,” Kristen whined from behind me. “I know I’m everyone’s residential code expert, but I still hate sitting down and staring at a screen.”

“Don’t say that out loud!” Patrick chided her.

“The sensors seem to be fine,” Digi-Dog said, “though there’s no way to truly tell without testing them. They could simply be faulty.”

“But if we can’t turn it on, we’ll never be able to tell,” Patrick said. He consumed the work space. I stood behind him, peering around his shoulders to catch a glimpse of the RC.

“It’s the microcontroller,” Kristen said, unplugging the small, flat board from the computer. “It’s going to need more than one of these to be able to operate fully. It’s too basic of a model to hold enough commands, even for a cleaning RC. This microcontroller just doesn’t have enough pins for speed control.”

“No wonder it can’t move!” Digi-Dog said.

“I can see where it should be hooked up, right here,” Patrick said, pointing his finger into a gap I couldn’t see. “Do we have an extra in the stock pile?”

The large pile of instruments and parts stared back at me. Digi-Dog stuck his hand inside and magically took out the exact part we needed, as though a magnet were attached to his hand. A tingle ran through my shoulders and my lower lip trembled. Why didn’t I have magnetic, magical microcontroller hands like everyone else?

“Perfect,” Patrick said, accepting the second control board. Kristen rushed over and handed hers to him. He snapped them both into place and began rebuilding the RC.

The machine whirred to life. I wanted to smash it back to silence with my fist.

Patrick gave my shoulder a gentle nudge. “It’s fine, Emma. You’re visionary on a larger scale. Leave this work to us.”

“That’s not good enough,” I said. “I need to be one of the best in the nation, and I can’t even figure out something as simple as this. Who the hell would pick me to be on a robotics team if I don’t understand robotics?”

“Lower your voice! The mentors will hear.” He leaned his head down. “That’s not all it takes to make a robot. Not nowadays, at least. We’re going to be creating a new race, Emma. We’ll need someone like you, or we’ll get so lost in the operating system technicalities we’ll forget they’re supposed to resemble living things.”

“I know you’re trying to be comforting, but I can’t take anything seriously when it comes from behind a helmet.”

“Sure, that’s the problem here,” he grumbled, shifting away.

Kristen swung her arm around my shoulder and wedged herself between Patrick and I.

“I’ll call over Winthrop. I promise to pretend like I wasn’t the only one to save the day.”

Kristen didn’t need to call him over. Winthrop swept by like a vulture while we worked, scanning our progress minute by minute. He moved in just as she looked up.

Patrick switched on the machine, its gears whirring as it buzzed across the table’s surface.

“Not only did we fix it, but we’re cleaning the table for you,” Kristen said, placing her hands on her hips.

He lifted his hand, revealing a stopwatch. “You finished 20 seconds before the team beside you, but 10 seconds after the team by the windows.” He squinted, his heavy lids creasing around his eyes. “Because we allow fifteen applicants on to the final evaluations, you have proceeded onward, though just barely. Certain members of the group who didn’t contribute as heavily to the examination will have to prove themselves in this final stage if they hope to be considered for the New Life Project.”

I don’t know if he actually stared at me, but his words definitely did. As though they were created for me, they rested heavy on my chest, reminding me how slim my chances were. Kristen’s arm tightened around my shoulders and Patrick leaned back toward me as a silent apology. I sunk against my friends and looked anywhere but at the RC.

Today was different than other days; it was the first day of independent testing, and each professor was going to be addressing us one-on-one throughout the afternoon. Patrick and Kristen were already called in. I remained in the waiting room, wondering if my name would be called at all.

“Emma Bloom?” Professor Dummit stood in the doorway his tall, bony frame leaning to the side as he waited for me. He gestured for me to join him with a flick of his wrist. I leapt to my feet and rushed to the door, relieved someone was willing to work with me.

Unlike Winthrop, Dummit was more interested in the kind of critical thinking I enjoyed. We sometimes engaged in small debates during class. I had no idea what was in store for me with my final task, considering Dummit would be issuing it. He’d been quietly watching all of us applicants this year. I’m sure he’d put a lot of thought into whatever he was going to assign me to do.

“Welcome to the final stage, Emma,” he said. We fell in step with each other and he led me down the hallway. “You should be proud of yourself for making it this far.”

“What? Are you implying that it’s a lucky miracle?”

He chuckled. “I have a bit more confidence in your talents than that. I believe you have a place in this program that none of the other applicants can fill.”

I remember that during the critical examination, Dummit had hovered over our table. He’d seen me at my best. “So what are you going to have me do to make sure I get in?”

He chuckled. “I wanted something for you that combines your strength and weakness in a way that will not only flaunt your abilities, but prove you can improve your weaknesses.”

I never expected a mentor would invest in my success to this level. “What’s the idea?”

“I’m not going to just assign a task for you. I want you to help me shape it for you.”

Reaching into his pocket, he withdrew a rusted key and slowed to a stop in front of a door. He swung it open, revealing a cramped lab room. The 3D printer was set up at the back wall of the room.

I gulped. “I’m going to build something, aren’t I?”

A closed smile stretched across his scruffy face. “A body part, in fact.”

My stomach churned. “What?”

“It will have to be fully functioning, of course.”

Part of me was thrilled that a mentor took time to think of a special task for me. Most of me was infuriated that it was a near-impossible do-or-die challenge that could easily end in humiliation and denial. “How the hell am I supposed to do that?”

“Do you want to go to the Capitol?”

He was backing me into a trap. If I denied the task, the only mentor rooting for me would be disappointed. If I accepted it, I’d be in for a week of misery and could possibly fail.

But if I said no, I didn’t stand a chance of succeeding at all.

“Since you’ve decided that all on your own, where does my input come in?” I asked.

“I haven’t picked a part for you yet, have I?”

I crossed my arms. “How generous of you to consider my feelings in this.”

He continued to smile. “You’ll thank me later, Emma.”

“You said this plays up to my strengths. How in the world does building a synthetic body part relate to what I’m good at?”

“Why don’t you tell me?” When I let out a moan, he added, “Tell me what you think your greatest strength is.”

I hesitated not because I was unsure, but because it was the first time a mentor bothered to ask. “I’m quick on my feet. I like to think the issues through and analyze the consequences of our choices.” It sounded like I was reading a line off of the first draft of a terrible resume, but I kept my posture tall and continued to stare Dummit straight in the eye.

“I saw your skill during the first examination. You chose the best power source to the same degree that our program director, Dr. Beckson did in the Capitol,” he said. “How do you think your skill could relate into building a body part?”

I had a feeling my answer was part of the test. “I’ll...be able to analyze my own weaknesses and direct my attention to them, rather than make mistakes as I go?”

I could tell it was the wrong answer. “We’ll get back to that. Perhaps picking a body part first will help you understand.”

“I could do something easy, like an upper arm,” I said. “But that won’t stand out much, will it? It’ll look like a basic cylinder, and won’t have any motion.” He nodded and I continued thinking aloud. “A brain is a bit complex, but more importantly...it’s not something unique to humans, or our replacements.”

“And what do you mean by that?” he edged me.

“Well, an RC has a brain. It’s simpler, but it functions just as well as an AI’s.”

“So what separates the two? Why don’t you think creating that holds value?”

“If this is supposed to be the evolution of humans, the programming does little to represent our existence. I need to choose something that directly relates to and represents the human experience.”

“That’s what I was thinking too,” he said. “Although programming is central and is the synthetic version of the human brain, it doesn’t speak to our existence specifically. It doesn’t tell a uniquely human story.”

“The face is all aesthetic. It doesn’t actively engage in much. If I made a head, it’d be more of an art project than a robotics one.” I pressed my fingers to my lips and inspiration struck. “A hand?”

“Why do you think that works better?” Dummit asked. “It’s not as obvious as the brain or the face, after all.”

“But it’s what interacts with the world more than anything, right? The human hand and the way we use it is unique to our species. It’s what built our society. It’s what will build the next generation, too.” A slim papercut showed on my fingertip where I’d sliced it flipped the page of a book the night before. “It’s a segue into the world.”

“A hand it is, then,” he said. “You’ll have about just five days.”

“What?”

“They’re getting impatient at the Capitol,” he said. “Apparently they’ve lost 63% of their scientists over the past year. If we’re going to finish this project before the last of us die out, we’re going to have to hurry it up. You’ve had a year of training: put it to use. Build the hand, Emma.”

My jaw was sore from tense clenching. “Yeah, I’ll do it,” I said. “I don’t know how in hell I’ll finish this on time, but I’ll do it.”

Kristen was told to write a PSA for the New Life Project and to “try to be a bit less sarcastic.” Patrick had to remove his gloves for the entire final examination. He looked miserable when I told him what my task was.

“That’s not fair, Emma!” he said. “Talk to one of the other mentors. I’m sure you can get a more reasonable one, like mine or Kristen’s.”

“Telling me not to be sarcastic for a week is *not* reasonable.”

“If I say I can’t do it, then they’ll *never* choose me. The second he suggested it, he backed me into a corner. Now I’m stuck with it.” I paused, staring down at the lab room key. “If I was left behind after this whole year of training... in a closed home...well, that thought is worse than dying.” I shook my head at the thought. “I can do it.”

When I returned home, Jane was sitting in the dining room, playing with string as she tied together a colorful bracelet, passing the evening with a tired, weary look in her eyes. I paused and planted a light kiss on top of her tightly-braided hair, where a few of her static, frizzy strands escaped and floated above her head. She smiled and pressed her head against my side before turning back to her work.

Jane was there the first time I’d watched someone die. While four years separated us, our actual birthdates were just a week and a half apart. When my eleventh and her seventh birthday approached, we were still living in a world where the illness was merely a headline draped across the computer screen or just below a reporter’s microphone, a clump of scary words alongside the usual dramatic stories about burning forests, drops in political poles, and high-profile lawsuits. It was an issue that took place in the corridors of specialized hospitals rather than in the rooms of our neighbor’s house or along the steps of our daily commute.

It was at this last birthday party of ours that the streaming news headlines slipped through the screen and infiltrated our own home life. We were about to cut the cake, a large, square chocolate creation smeared with purple and white frosting. We all hovered around the cake attentively while she retrieved a lighter. Jane's friend Allison knelt on the edge of her chair, peering to get a closer look at the frosted decorations, her lips parted in silent awe just before she leaned over and smeared her face into the cake, pressing it down against the frosting and into the spongy surface until it concaved in on itself, its structure collapsing beneath her weight.

Jane was silent, staring in wide-eyed terror. Miles hovered behind her as though unsure if he wanted to lift her out of it or bark out a reprimand. My mother pressed her fingers to her temple, humming to herself as she tried to calm her breathing, the bags under her eyes deeper than ever. A few giggles erupted from our group of friends, and I felt a scream bubble in my chest before bursting out.

"Allison!" I shrieked. "Allison, you little freak! Why the hell did you do that? Why are you so *stupid*? You're not even funny!" At my age, these were quite heavy insults; a few of the guests' mouths dropped open and one of my friends suppressed a laugh. "You're such a freaking *idiot*!" I let out a long moan and gave her shoulder a hard punch.

Even now, though I've seen a hundred deaths since then, just as immediate, painless, and strange, this one still haunts me more than any other. I think it has to do with the ridiculousness of it, the oddness of the moment, the way she toppled onto her side from the force of my blow, her head flopping over to reveal a frosting-smeared, wide-eyed face. The girls continued to laugh, laugh, laugh, because Allison looked so freaking stupid. What was she doing, anyway? It was all so stupid. She even had a candle stuck to the side of her sugar-coated cheek, clinging to the sticky white frosting. I wanted to punch her so bad but Miles held me back, and Jane began

to quietly sob for her cake, tears shimmering in her wide eyes as she stared at its carved corpse, its brown, crumbled insides revealed to the world. Miles – a recent survivor of puberty – lifted me straight off my feet, his arms wrapped around my waist as he carried me back, away from the scene, away from the party, away from that bitch Allison who destroyed my cake and made Jane cry, all for a chorus of jittery laughter. He carried me all the way down the hall and into the bathroom, planting me in front of the toilet and lifting both lids before he said, “if you get sick, make sure to hold your hair back.”

It’s kind of funny, how Allison died. Death wasn’t always a solemn thing, because it was so often ridiculous. When my grandfather died, we hovered around his hospital bed for over a month before we found the room with the sheets tightly made, and wept as his coffin was buried into the ground. When my fifth grade teacher died of cancer we stuffed ourselves into overly-packed pews and listened to over an hour of lengthy prayers and eulogies honoring her devotion to teaching. But when Allison died, we were left not with an empty hospital room, or a eulogy, but with the image of her cake-smearred face with crumbs caking her eyelashes. Long after her parents were called and the party came to a close, Miles and I went to throw out the cake, only to find one straggling guest grabbing a handful from the corner, away from the imprint Allison had left and the stray hairs that clung to some areas of the frosting.

As doctors searched for any link between patients, they discovered the small, red rash that formed on the back of patients’ lower necks. The discovery added no knowledge to the origin or spread of the illness, but acted as a telltale sign that alerted one to their imminent death. I developed the habit of checking my neck back then. I’d check Jane’s for her, too, lifting her braid and flicked at her birthmark; it seemed to burn like a rash depending on the lighting.

Miles' short hair couldn't disguise his neck, but sometimes I'd tug his collar down to ensure it wasn't hiding from view.

I can't remember if I stopped going to school because it shut down, or if it shut down because everyone stopped going. Soon I was down with Miles in the basement, mapping out our futures. We borrowed from libraries, knowing we never had to return them. Jane continued to attend school for special art lessons with Mrs. Jesson until she came home with a sack full of art supplies and teary eyes, informing us that Mrs. Jesson found her spot and that there would be no more special classes. The kitchen became her art studio became the kitchen after that while the basement became our library.

I've always read anything I could get my hands on, and that included the sensational novel, "The Last Choice." It was the last piece of writing that swept the nation as a whole before mass death created cracks through the nation, slicing and dividing the people until communication and transportation were impossible. The protagonist, Annie, knew when everyone around her would die. Annie struggled to decide when to tell friends, family, and acquaintances their death date, unsure if it made their last days more pleasurable and worthwhile, or did it distract them from the present? Her own date was a mystery until she encountered a man with the same ability as her. In the end, the man asked for his date but Annie decided to keep hers a mystery. She lived out the remainder of her life without knowing her own date.

I own a copy. I hid it from Miles, but I read it at least five times. I discussed the themes and questions it posed with Miles, though I didn't tell him my thoughts stemmed from fiction. When I asked, Miles said he would rather know when he was going to die. "I check my neck once a day," he said. "I'd rather know how much time I have left so I can make sure I don't waste it. I want to make sure I accomplish whatever I can before I die."

“Sometimes I wonder what difference it would make,” I said. “Whether or not I knew, I don’t know what I’d decide to leave behind.”

At the time, the idea of synthetic beings sounded insane. Cloning and cell growth were talked about for a short period of time before organic materials were written off, as they could be susceptible to the same illness we were. That’s when the idea of New Life was accepted as a legitimate possibility. It was the next phase of human evolution, scientists said. We were using our knowledge of technology to pass on a version of ourselves that was immune to the physical destruction of our race.

I loved throwing ideas back and forth with Miles, wondering what New Life would be like.

“What body types do you think they’ll have?” I asked one night, spread across his bed with my hands behind my head. At age fourteen, three years into the plague, my feet were just beginning to reach the end, my toes pointing over the side.

“I doubt we’ll have obese robots waddling around the Earth.” He was bent on the rug counting pushups in his head.

“So they’ll all be athletes like you?”

“I’m not an athlete. I’m training.”

“I wonder if they’ll have militias to train for, too.”

“That would mean the New Life would have war.”

“Robot war.” Too bad the publishing industry was dead. That would have made a great book. Now, left without fiction, I had no moral compass to guide me and relied solely on these conversations with Miles. He was the closest thing I had.

“I’m thinking an androgynous, race-less New Life might take care of the possibility of war,” he said. “People just fight because they’re different, so if they’re all the same-”

“But that’s not any fun!”

He sat on his side to face me. “A world with no war is no fun?”

“I’m just imagining a world full of Mom. Everyone looks and acts like Mom.” I let out a loud yawn. “Boring!”

“Maybe if you just keep thinking about that, you’ll finally fall asleep and leave me alone.”

I scrunched my nose. “If you think about these things, prove it!”

He sighed. “It all boils down to what humans decide to pass on. If we make a better version of ourselves, or the same old, same old.”

“If we don’t have the same old, same old, you’ll be out of a job, soldier boy!”

“Emma...I’ll be dead.”

I crossed my arms and rolled away. “That’s morbid.”

“That’s a fact of life now. We have to figure these things out before humans die out and it’s too late.”

Veering the conversation to a simpler topic, I asked, “Which actor would you base New Life off of, if you could decide? We can go look in the old DVD cabinet for inspiration if you want-”

He rose and yanked me off the bed. “Shut up and go to sleep!”

Protests broke out as minorities fretted that their stories would be left out by the high-profile historians the government selected to record the human history for the New Life. Peace groups advocated for a removal of all wars and violence in the depiction of human history in the

hopes that the new race wouldn't take after us. Intellectuals argued that it was impossible to pass on our values and strengths without poisoning the next race with the ideas that led to violence and disorder. It all boiled down to the two concepts Miles laid out for me: a fully evolved, perfected generation of New Life vs an exact replica of current humanity.

The issue was that I spent more time researching debates when I should have been studying computer code, inorganic chemistry, engineering, or the latest 3D printing technology. It was no wonder I was behind when it came to lab work, even after a year in the New Life program. Soon, my house would be closed off; no one would enter, no one would leave. I wouldn't be here when that happened. Even if the world was dying – even if there wasn't anything left for me to receive from it – I would force myself out there and give my life for the cause.

Patrick and Kristen were in the University's library when I dashed toward them and threw myself into a nearby chair.

Kristen peered at me over her desktop. "Well good morning, Emma."

"I had a nightmare that I made the hand last night," I said, "and it crawled up my sheets and strangled me to death."

"Maybe it's a metaphor about creation and motherhood, based on your own experience?"

I grabbed a nearby paperback and tossed it in her direction.

"Whose hand are you going to base it off of?" Patrick asked, pushing back his chair.

I stared down at this hand which was gloved, as usual, in a tight-fitting, thick black fabric. "Not yours, for sure."

Kristen stretched out her arm and stared at her hand. "My drunk Uncle Brendan once said I could be a hand model."

"I figured I'd just base it off my own," I said with a shrug. "I'll just scan it to the 3D printer."

Patrick frowned. "Isn't that a little conceited, Emma? Basing a hand that represents a new future off of your own?"

"And you've got a hand model, right here, offering up her services for free!"

"Kristen, we both know you can't stand still long enough for the scanner to work," I said.

She tapped the side of her head. “You can’t just think like a scientist, Emma. We are the artists of the world, painting the new future. We are deciding what the next generation will look like, and we can’t think like basic bitches. We have to think *beautifully*.”

“At the very least, I’m not going to let anyone ever base New Life off of you,” I said to Patrick. “We don’t need to make robots with helmets for heads.”

“Wouldn’t a robot with a helmet head represent this generation, though?”

“No, it would represent one idiot in an entire generation.”

“Well, I am a hand model, if you need me,” Kristen said.

I pulled myself out of the chair. “This conversation has just proven how much The New Life Project needs me.”

Patrick threw his arms up. “I thought we were helping!”

“Make sure not to wiggle your fingers when the scanner’s on,” Kristen called after me as I stomped away. “The next generation can’t look deformed!”

I spent four of the five days hunched at the desk, scrutinizing every detail of my project. Squinting over the details of the hand’s internal composition, I eventually relented and put on my reading glasses. I couldn’t help but think of how a synthetic being will never have to worry about losing its sight. The visions of our world through their small, glassy screens of eyes could never be dimmed unless the glass itself was physically cracked. Perhaps, long after we were gone, they themselves would create an ever better generation of synthetic beings that wouldn’t even face the risk of a cracked eye.

I had a tangle of wires in front of me, and I hadn’t even scanned my hand yet. I closed my eyes, feeling my eyelids burn and tingle as they pressed shut. I needed a nap. A long one.

“Emma?”

Jane was standing in the open doorway, her small hand raised to knock. Her eyes were locked on me as she hovered in the entrance.

“Jeez, you scared me. Come on in.” She smiled and scurried over to me. “How did you find the room I was in? Please don’t tell me you’ve been checking every single one until you found me here on the third floor.”

“It’s the only light that’s still on, silly.” She dragged a nearby chair over to my desk and sat down, her hands folded in her lap. “It’s been three days since I’ve seen you, and I know you’re leaving soon. You haven’t packed, and I just...wanted to make sure you hadn’t left without saying goodbye.”

I kicked the wheel of her chair with a laugh. “What do you think I am?” Jane was no longer that eager, confused girl she had been when she’d caught Miles and me conspiring in the basement years ago. By now, she knew what our plan was. She knew Miles had left for the military and that this – me joining The New Life Project – had been planned years ago. And she knew her place, too, that she would watch Mom until her passing days.

I rubbed my eyes and let out a yawn. “I just need to scan my hand and then get the machine to print it out.”

She stiffened a bit. “You’re going to replicate yourself?”

“Just the shape of my hand,” I said. “Then I have to fill it with this mess of wires.” I pointed to the clump on my desk. “In other words, I’m screwed.”

“You know, Picasso said that once an artist masters the human hand, they can draw anything. If you can do this, I’m sure the mentors will select you in a heartbeat.”

“Picasso never experienced 3D printing.” I offered out a hand. “I suppose I should show you how smart I’ve gotten over the years. Miles isn’t here to see me brag, so I’ll make you listen instead.”

I guided her over to the 3D printing machine, and pressed my hand down onto the surface beneath the scanner. “Go on. Make me proud,” she teased. Her smile gave away the fact that, prematurely, she already was.

I suddenly remembered a time she had declared she’d be as smart as me one day. I think I laughed. I don’t know why. It wasn’t that I thought I was smarter than she was. I think that as a child, I honestly believed there was no need for her to ever study like I did. That her purpose was so different than mine, her intellect didn’t matter.

I often wondered what she remembered and what she didn’t, growing up in a world that had transformed before she’d even hit puberty. I don’t know why I never asked.

“It scans from above,” I said as a red glow was cast over my hand. It enveloped my wrist and part of my arm. “I have...no idea how to cut the arm out of the final product. I guess I’ll have to saw it off.”

“You can crop the image out on the computer, can’t you?”

The distant memory of my condescension from all those years ago stung. “You’re right. You’re a smart one, Jane.”

She flushed and looked down when I said that. “I-I’m not smart. Mrs. Jesson used to talk about the artistic side of things when The New Life Project was gaining attention. She said I was going to make the prettiest people someday, and that all my art was going to walk right off the page. I know a thing or two about digital art, thanks to her.”

The scan beeped to a finish. “If this isn’t the sexiest, most efficient hand in the history of hands, I’m done for.” I glanced over at the computer connected to the scanner, where the image of my hand was being uploaded.

“You were never very artistic.” Staring over at the computer, she nodded as she said, “Here, I’ll help you.”

My lower lip fell. “You can’t do that!”

“Oh, no one will know!” she said. “Besides, I’ve always been better at these things than you.” I was suddenly aware that I no longer had to look down to lock eyes with her. Jane was almost my height now. “This is your chance to personalize the hand a bit if there are any issues with the scan,” she said. “Such as cropping out your arm.” She clicked and selected the area. “It’s like painting on a computer.”

“Then you better do it perfectly.”

“You’re the one asking your homebody sister for help.”

“You’re the one that came here, practically begging to pitch in.”

“Did you have any ideas for visual alternations?”

“Are you saying my hand isn’t good enough?”

“I’m asking because I don’t know a thing about what these synthetic beings are meant to look like.”

I paused. “I was thinking about giving it a really, really long lifeline.”

“I still think we should spruce it up a bit, though. Hands are important to us, and we’re supposed to be passing on something of ourselves into these synthetic beings, aren’t we? Hands were what brought us into this world.”

I smirked. “Did Mom never teach you about sex-ed?”

“I meant *literally*! The doctor or nurses or whoever, they guided us out, and cleaned and held us. Hands were the first thing we experienced.”

“You can draw on a mole or something if it’ll make you happy.”

“Don’t draw on just any mole,” she snapped. “Draw on a mole that matters.”

“Moles never matter. They’re just ugly sunburns. And considering that, it wouldn’t make much sense if this hand had one. So moles and freckles are out of the question.”

“That’s sad, because I have the cutest little brown mole on one of my knuckles.”

“Well, the next generation isn’t going to get cute little moles. You’re out of luck, kiddo.”

“Perhaps a scar, then. They can still get scratched up and damaged.”

“I don’t know if I want my final project to look damaged.”

“If we’re passing ourselves on, we have to think of more than recorded history,” she said. “There’s physical history, too, recorded on our bodies. Like how you always get freckles in the summer, but they vanish in the winter. It shows how much you hate going outside in the cold, that you don’t get any sun at all.”

Her hair was tightly knotted back as usual, and her thin shoulders were squared and firm. I could see the imprint of a birthmark on the back of her neck, barely concealed by her collar.

“I guess I envision these new beings as totally perfect. Just, shut off from imperfections like being weary of the cold, or,” I stared at her birthmark, “so insecure of some part of their body that they try to cover it up. I guess I see them as immune to all of these things, like some superior version of us. But by saying that, I guess I’m deciding what parts of us are good and which are bad, and you obviously disagree.”

“I don’t know if I do,” she said. “I want to think these things are important. But it could be the fact that I’m so hung up on these details that I can’t see the big picture.”

“What’s your big picture?” I asked suddenly. “Are you still going to stay here after I leave?”

Her fingers faltered at the keyboard. “Isn’t that the plan?”

I shrugged. “That was a long time ago, wasn’t it? You haven’t shown any other interests than staying here, but...you’re good with this part of the project, don’t you think?”

“It’s not like I can just leave with you.”

“Why not? One of the older guys is planning on bringing his wife, and this younger one has mentioned having his mom come along.”

“That...was never part of the plan.” She bent over her work, her face hidden. “I don’t know if I necessarily need a big picture. Years ago, people would have killed for the luxury to stay at home and indulge in their hobbies. If anything, I’ll be living in luxury.”

“You think so?”

The question hung in the air. In a way, though, it fell on my shoulders more than hers. I had never brought it up to her. My gaze had been so fixed on that original plan that I had never thought that, perhaps, things could change along the way. So when she didn’t respond, I asked the question I should have years ago. “What do you want to do?”

She turned her chair around, though her eyes remained fixed elsewhere. “...Something.”

“Something?”

She stared down at the hand. “I feel like I’m doing something right now. I’m making something that could do good.”

I laughed. “The only good that hand is going to do is get me accepted. I’m sure it’ll be scrapped shortly after.” I shook my head. “But I get what you mean. You have a talent for the more artistic side of this. That’s something a lot of us don’t have, but we envision them to be

perfect in our heads, so we'll need people like you. If we can get this hand approved, I'll bring you with me. If you want," I said, backtracking. I was streamlining again without asking her thoughts.

She surprised me turning and leaping into my arms. I pressed my cheek against the top of her head and wrapped my arms around her.

"Okay," I said. "I understand. Okay."

A beep rang out and Jane pulled back. I opened the printer, revealing a smooth, flat surface.

"Where's the hand?" she asked. "Is it broken?"

I smiled and straightened my shoulders. For once, I knew more about creating synthetic beings than someone else in the room. "It's all scraps. We have to blow away the excess material."

I slid my free hand into the pile, the metal scraps pinching against my skin. Intertwining my hand with the synthetic one, I pulled it from the pile.

I placed it on the desk between us and we stood, side by side, staring down at our creation. It looked just like mine but smoother, unmarked, with clear, metallic peach coating where skin should have been.

Jane broke the silence. "In the nineteenth century, it was customary for women to have sculptures made of their hands. It was a way to immortalize their youth." A shiver ran up my spine. This hand was mine, but it would never grow or wrinkle or age. "Auguste Rodin was one of the most famous hand sculptors. I don't think the two of you would have gotten along, though."

From the way she spoke his name, it was obvious she respected him. “Oh, and why is that?”

“He would have hated how we smoothed out the hand, erased the blemishes and wrinkles. He wouldn’t have accepted this as a human hand.”

“It’s not.”

“But if you really look at it, it’s barely a hand at all.” It *was* a bit doll-like. “Rodin’s artistic goal was to represent human feelings and the emotional experience through his depiction of hand muscles. What do you think of that?”

“He thinks too much about hands.” I brushed my fingertips over the hand’s smooth surface. “I guess your friend Rodin would say I erased the emotional experience from this hand when I had you edit the design. I know it’s my hand, but, in a way, it’s really not.” I pulled back, clenched my fingers by my side. My nails dug into the soft skin of my palm. “My hand isn’t anything like this one. They’re twins, but this one isn’t mine. Whoever wears it won’t be me. They’ll have a different emotional experience to record, if they have any at all.”

Jane’s light eyebrows furrowed. “If they have any at all?”

I picked at a stray scrap of metal on the hand. “Who knows what we’ll pass on? I can’t envision what they’ll be like exactly. This hand could belong to a being that looks and acts exactly like a sixteen year old girl, or it could belong to someone who doesn’t have my worries or feelings or pains.”

Jane smiled. “I think a world without you would be boring.”

“Maybe boring is better.”

I lifted the synthetic hand, clasping it in both of my own. It was prettier than mine, untarnished by years of bruising, scraping, and bending. The next phase of human evolution could be the most successful.

I swallowed a nutrition pill and headed down to the main lobby where the other applicants were seated, waiting for the final test to begin.

“Where’s the hand?” Kristen asked. I pulled it out of my jacket pocket and switched it to life so the fingers moved. Several others applicants glanced up, eyes wide as they took in my project.

Patrick turned and shook my shoulder. “You did it, Emma! You’ll have to be accepted now!”

“Tuck it under your sleeve and pretend like it’s your own,” Kristen said. “Pass it in with the synthetic hand, and then say, ‘oh, I forgot this,’ and then push it out of your sleeve and hand it to them with the test.”

“It’s not that great,” I said. “I’m going to give it to Dummit when I go in, and he’ll show it to the other mentors.”

“Well, you two better pass,” Kristen said, “because I’ve already got our celebration party together.”

“Party?” I echoed. The vintage lingo stumbled on my tongue.

“Mhm! I traded Old Mickey a ten-pack of nutrition pills for a beer.”

“A *what?*” The word was even more foreign to me than party.

“Kristen, if we drink something like that, we’ll die,” Patrick said. “Our stomachs are empty. It’ll burn right through.”

“That’s why I only got one,” she said. “We’ll all take sips. I think our livers are out of use and, Patrick, for all you know, alcohol could ward off the illness. Mickey’s still alive after all this time, and all he’s done differently than us is drink the remains of his liquor counter.”

“Alcohol,” Patrick muttered to himself, slumping back in the couch. “I don’t know, Kristen...”

“I’d rather die drunk with my two best friends than in the street for no fucking reason like the rest of the population,” she said. “We’ll go to the old red truck on Cedar Cliff. We’ll stare at the trees, talk about better times, and get drunk off three sips. It’ll be monumental, guys. We’ll experience all of our teen years in the course of one night before heading off to a professional career at the age of sixteen.”

I pursed my lips and shrugged. “I guess as long as we throw up after we shouldn’t get too messed up. Besides, you’re right. We should be the punk-ass rebels teens were supposed to be before heading to the Capitol.”

“Rebels, huh?” Patrick murmured to himself. “I never realized what freaking nerds we were until this moment.”

“This coming from the kid with a helmet on his head.”

He crossed his arms, though it looked more like he was hugging himself. “If I fail this, it means everything leading up to this moment was worth shit. And it’s not like I can just pick a different career if this doesn’t work. No second chances. We’ll all end up like Emma’s Mom, living in a closed house. Or like Mickey, selling relics like beer to teens for nutrition pills-”

The kid with the braces threw his hands up, glaring at us from across the room. “Can you shut up? You’re triggering my anxiety!”

I clenched my synthetic hand into a fist and waved it at him. “Watch it how you talk to my friend, Metal Mouth!” I glanced over at Patrick. “Though he’s right. You do need to shut up.” I shot Metal Mouth a glare. “*I’m* allowed to say that.”

Winthrop appeared in the door. “You may all proceed into the examination room.”

The room had been put together months ago and now, there were more chairs than applicants. Entire rows were left vacant by the applicants who hadn’t made it to this stage thanks to the elimination process or, in several cases, illness. I had made it further than over half the applicants.

Though the technical questions still stumped me at parts, I knew I aced all open-ended questions about the program. As I scribbled my thoughts and opinions about the project and my role in it, I felt as though everything Miles and I had worked for had led up to this one moment.

After the test, I actually stole Kristen’s idea, slipping the synthetic hand into my sleeve. I knew it was cheesy but after being ignored for a year, I had no shame in being a little showy. I walked up to where the mentors sat in a row at the front desk. Only Dummit looked up as I approached. I shot him a reassuring grin. I held the controller to the hand in my sleeve, making the fingers clutch my test as I stepped up to them.

“I’m finished,” I said, pushing my arm forward.

Winthrop barely looked up as he accepted it. “Mmhm.”

He accepted the paper, not noticing my hand. I thrust it outward. “Thank you for the opportunity to be an applicant to The New Life Program,” I said formally, waiting for him to accept my outstretched hand. He let out a weary sigh and met my eyes before glancing at my hand. He and cringed at the touch. I let go of the controller. He pulled back and the hand came with him, its grip locked around him.

“You didn’t notice,” I said, unable to resist the stab.

Winthrop stared dumbly at the hand, and Dummit piped up. “This was the extra assignment I gave her.”

Winthrop pressed the controllers, watching as the fingers moved seamlessly. The other mentors hovered, watching closely.

“We’ll definitely take this into consideration,” one of the older mentors vowed, nodding enthusiastically. “Definitely.”

I glanced at Dummit before I left and was surprised when he wasn’t wearing the same impressed expression as the other mentors. I could tell from his darkened features that he was less than impressed with the hand. Although I’d won over the other mentors, I couldn’t help but curse myself inwardly. What mistakes had I made that warranted the disgusted look on his face?

Someone died after I left, right there in the examination room. Digi Dog let out a loud hurrah. Patrick said it made him want to hit him, but Kristen said Digi-Dig would probably get credit for being so unbothered by the death. She was right. Along with Metal Mouth, the guy with the PhD, four others and the three of us, Digi Dog was accepted into the program.

When the mentors came out and told us the results, Kristen threw her arms across my shoulders and Patrick took us both into his wide arms, gripping us into a group hug. I searched for Dummit, but he found me first. His remarks were quick and made in passing, and the moment was so fast I barely had time to process his words. “Was that hand based off of your own?”

“Of course.”

“May I see?” I stretched out my hand in front of him, studying his expression. He merely nodded and said, “The one you passed in looks nothing like yours. It looks nothing like a human hand at all.”

“I mean...there was some editing done,” I said, “but I think I improved it! You told me to play up my critical thinking skills. Well, I thought critically and decided giving it a damaged look and blemishes wouldn’t represent the human experience well.”

Dummit sighed and shook his head. “I never said your skill was critical thinking, Emma. You did.” Before I could ask what he considered my talent to be, he ended the conversation with “I’ll see you in the Capitol, Emma.”

He walked away, leaving me disgruntled. A sudden impact snapped me back to reality as Kristen smacked into my side, laughing widely.

“Beer party, here we come!” she cried, pumping her fist in the air. “And tomorrow, we’re off to the Capitol!”

Patrick wrapped his arms around our shoulders. “I’m so excited – but I’ve barely packed at all! Can I finish packing all my supplies before we meet up?”

“Your supplies?” I echoed. “Do you mean a bunch of your superstitious, illness-repellant charms?”

“I’m just being careful-” Before he could finish his retaliation, he flinched and turned around. Carol, the older woman with the son in the capitol, had tapped him on his shoulder.

She hovered on the outskirts of our small circle, clutching onto the fabric of his jacket. Her wedding ring, trapped in the folds of her wrinkled, swollen fingers, sparkled against the plain fabric of his jacket. “You’re such a handsome, handsome young man,” she choked. Kristen swayed backward on her heels, shooting me a frozen, wide-eyed stare. A tingle traveled

up my spine. I'd almost forgotten about the people who hadn't been accepted. "You remind me so much of my son Charles."

Patrick was still, turning his head between Carol, Kristen and I. Carol was older than I remembered, the top of her wispy head barely reaching his shoulders. Her grip on him was shaky, yet secure. Patrick didn't shake her off.

"I've missed him so much," she said, her coarse voice cracking. She then slid her arms around his waist, pressing her cheek against his chest. Patrick was stiff, his arms dangling by his sides. He raised one and patted her upper back. His head was turned to us, as if looking for assistance.

"Do you think Charles will wonder where I am?" she murmured against the fabric of Patrick's plaid button-up.

Patrick slid his arms around her slumping shoulders. It wasn't a tight embrace, but Carol sunk into it gratefully. He kept hold of her as she continued to shake in his arms. Kristen stared in disbelief but I couldn't help but smile.

Carol's eyes clenched shut and her pale lower lip trembled. "You know...for a while now, I think I've begun to forget what butterscotch actually tastes like."

Patrick waited until she released him. The three of us stood close as we exited the room and then the building. It wasn't until we were outside that Patrick pulled out his disinfectant wipes and cleaned off his hands. He performed the action silently, holding back any lectures about personal space and contamination.

I didn't go for Kristen's beer first; instead, I took a hold of the blue sack that was slung around Patrick's shoulder. I tore it away with little resistance and turned my back to him, already rummaging through its contents by the time he reached my side.

"Dust masks," I said, pushing them to the side. "Gloves. Sanitizer. More gloves.... What did you do, rampage an old convenience store?"

Kristen peered over my shoulder. "Is that a...a gas mask?"

"A can of something called *Infecticide*," I said, "and a package – an *open* package, at that – entitled *Immune Cleansing Tablets*. Patrick, this is insanity."

"Coming from the girl who just decided she's going to sneak her sister along on our voyage," Patrick said, snatching his bag back.

I leaned back against the hood of the old, red truck, measuring its stability before pushing myself up onto its surface. Kristen followed after, crawling all the way onto the top of the car while Patrick settled for a lower spot beside me.

"Mickey gave me this knickknack to open the bottle," Kristen said, holding up a metal stick with a circle at the end. "Do you think it screws off?"

Patrick let out a sigh and reached up toward her. "My Dad used to drink all the time, until the stores went out of business. Here. It snaps off."

The cap rolled down the hood of the car, resting by my knee.

"You have to take the first sip," I told her. "I'm still unsure about this."

She shook her head at me. “You’re a bunch of sissies! We need to embrace our youth tonight! It’s our last chance, isn’t it? We have to be young and wild, like we were supposed to be.”

“I still think we’d be nerds,” Patrick grumbled. She kicked him in the shoulder blade.

“Maybe you would be, but I’m sure I would have been written into the high school yearbook as class clown.”

“Well, then I’d get best dressed,” he declared, tapping the side of his helmet. “At least nowadays.”

“No.”

“Definitely not.”

“There is no era when that is acceptable.”

He crossed his arms and slumped back against the windshield.

Kristen held up the bottle, as though raising it to the expanse of woods below the hill. “To mothering New Life!”

I raised my fist as though I, too, were holding a bottle, while Patrick grumbled that she was being sexist. Giving him one last kick, she raised the bottle to her lips and took a long swig.

“All right, that was your sip,” I declared. “That was enough to count for two. You’re done.”

“It takes like my Grandmother smells,” she said, sputtering as drips of the liquid trickled down her chin. “Please, someone else share my pain!”

“Patrick’s next! That way he’ll have to take off the helmet.”

“Then I’ll just have to show you my technique!” He accepted the bottle and lifted the bottom of his helmet without removing it entirely. He snaked the bottle in through the gap and

tilted his head back along with it. He last a second before he shoved it toward me, coughing and gagging.

“It tastes like dirt,” he said. “Liquid dirt. And it’s probably the last thing my Dad experienced in this world.”

The bottle was in my hands now. “It’s been a while since I’ve had anything but nutrition pills.”

“Exactly,” Kristen said. “Go on.”

I closed my eyes, sucked in a breath, and raised the glass to my mouth. It wasn’t particularly cool, but it felt like it against my warm lips. I took the faintest sip, feeling the thick, foamy texture sift over my tongue. I quickly swallowed and thrust the bottle away from me.

“Well, being rebellious was fun. I think I’m done for now.”

“You did good, champs.” Kristen twisted the neck of the bottle in her fingers. “Now we can begin our journey without any regrets.”

Patrick’s shoulders slumped. “One sip of beer compensates for an entire childhood?”

Kristen ran her finger around the rim of the bottle. “I told my Grandma I was accepted before I came out here, you know. She said it was about damn time I did something useful, and she was glad I was going to be gone. She said it was God taking mercy on her by taking me off his hands. My brother was sobbing the whole time because he’s so damn afraid of having to deal with her alone. He’s too sensitive, that boy.” I didn’t bother objecting as she raised the bottle to her lips again. “But you know what? I know what she was actually thinking when she said it. She was thinking ‘Thank you, God, that I don’t have to watch both of them die before I go’.”

Patrick lifted his legs up, close to his chest. “I just kind of ran out of my house. I packed and I ran right out. The rooms were empty, but I couldn’t even look inside them. I didn’t...want

to say bye. Maybe we would have been the same wrecks if we were just going to college. Moving away for the first time.”

“But at least then we know there’s something to come back to,” I said. “We’re going to die in the Capitol.”

“I almost wished I could give my spot to Carol for a second there,” Patrick said. “At least she has a reason to go. I’m just going because I’ve got nothing better to do.”

I slapped his arm. “Your reason is better than hers. She was going to do what? Visit her son before they both died, assuming that he’s still alive or that she’d survive the trip. They’d hug, talk for a bit, and that’d be that. She never would have finished the project. She was just using it, for her own benefit. You deserve it.”

“I know, I know. I just can’t help but think I might have done the same thing, now that I know what it’s like when you never get to see someone again.”

“You bitches need more beer,” Kristen said. “This is getting a bit heavy.”

“That drink is a bit heavy,” I said. “Why couldn’t you have traded for something that had actual taste?”

“They’ll be plenty of pill flavored shops on the ride to the Capitol, and none of them will capture adolescence the way sharing a beer does!”

I slid down the edge of the hood. “I should head home to pack with Jane. I’ll meet up with you guys later, okay?”

Kristen snorted. “Lame!”

“Don’t get sick on the way!”

I ignored them both and began heading back toward Central. The hill was by the University, so it wasn’t long before I was once again caught in the bustle of the city.

Wide-Mouthed Tony was up ahead, perched in his usual spot. It was just my luck that he was on duty. I glanced to the other side of the street, considering crossing, but knew he would just scream across at me. I decided to square my shoulders and march right up to him.

“I got accepted into The New Life Program,” I said.

He clapped mockingly. “So not only do you not care about saving the children, but you’re going to replace them with chunks of cold, hard metal?”

“It’s a better alternative to the old system, where someone like you stood a chance of reproducing.”

“Spicy as ever! I’m amazed that you’re still so adamantly opposed to my work, considering your family’s support of The Children’s Movement.”

I had been ready to storm past him until then. I froze, my hands dampening in my pockets. “What are you talking about?”

“I was on house calls most of the day,” he said. “Your family is on a list of households with no illness-related deaths. Your house was set to be closed today, so I had to stop by. People who close houses tend to support our movement. When I talked about my cause to your mother, she offered up her assistance.”

He smirked, drawing out the moment with a pause that made my skin crawl. “We offer the potential for a cure, and people send money and test subjects our way. That woman is more afraid of death than anything else in this world. She didn’t need more of a reason than that. I barely had to give my whole usual speech before she offered your sister over.”

I had his collar in his hands and his back shoved against the side of the vehicle before he had time to let out a screech. “What did you do with Jane?”

His nostrils flared. “Your mother went on about how your brother had joined the military, and you were going to be a scientist, but not the kind she was interested in. She said to take Jane. So I did.”

“You forced her!” I shook him, slamming him back against his poster board so hard it fell over. “She was going to join me! Where is she? Where did you bring her?”

“My recruitment officer took her. She’s long gone now,” he said. “I wasn’t the one that made her do it. Your mother did. Your mother was the one who had her carried out.”

My vision blurred as blood rushed to my head. I still held him, but I couldn’t tell how tightly. I felt nothing but the tightness in my chest. “What did Jane do? Did she struggle? She must have struggled.” I shoved him again. I couldn’t feel my arms, but he flew back. Either my force remained strong or he didn’t resist. “Where did they take her?”

“Like I’d tell that to an enemy with military connections.” He slipped his arms between us, shoving me off. I didn’t bother holding on. I staggered back, my muscles going limp.

The way my arms dangled and trembled by my sides, it was though my bones and muscles had dissolved. “I’m not going to find her, am I?” I sucked in my lower lip. I wanted to raise my hands up to my mouth to suppress a sob, or to his throat to strangle him until he told me where she was – but there were no tears to come, and there was no way to catch up to her. I had to leave tomorrow, early. And my driver wasn’t about to derail our mission so I could go on a manhunt. I’d be no better than Carol.

I need to let go. I need to let go. This is the world now. No one is permanent. Nothing belongs to me. And that’s okay. Because I have purpose. I’m rising above all of this-

“Fuck you, Tony,” I said, backing away. “Fuck you, and fuck anyone who thinks what you’re doing is going to help anyone. You’re going to die, just like I’m going to die. You’re

going to crumple over like the pathetic piece of shit you are. You're going to be knocked down just as easily as your poster. And no one is going to remember you, and no one is going to care." I shook my head and turned, darting down the street on uneasy legs that shifted and wobbled like loose planks below me. I needed to get home. I needed to see my mother. I wasn't going to leave without seeing her. Not now.

I forgot that my house was closed until I stood in front of the doorway. It was now blocked by a large, clear wall that connected to a window where my door used to be. There was nothing in the room but a small bag and a chair. My mother sat, staring forward. Waiting for me.

The door to the glass room was open. I could smell brick and mortar as I stepped through, staring at the sloppily constructed wall and window where the door had been. She didn't blink as I approached the glass. I wanted to see her blink. Rolling my fists, I smashed them against the clear wall. It was thick and heavy, shaking underneath my force but showing no signs of breaking. It must be plastic. I continued to pound against it, using my shoulders and my elbow.

As I slammed my side against the shuddering, transparent wall, I caught a glimpse of Mom. She had moved her armchair here; she'd expected this meeting. She sat in it same as ever, now with her hands folded in front of herself protectively. She stared past me, out into the street. I stepped back, my trembling, throbbing form still before her.

My peripheral vision was blurry, my eyes burning as I resisted tears. "You had the house closed today because you knew this wall would be here. You waited until the day I left, and never tried to keep me in here with you, because you're scared of me." Spoken aloud, my

accusation sounded true. It gave me a rush of power but also enraged me further. She still refused to look at me.

I swallowed, a sting pinching my throat. “You’re not just scared of the illness. You’re scared of me.” I was up against the wall again, my body pressed against it so I could hover above her, my fists planted against the surface. “Do you know what they do in The Children’s Movement? Jane has no scientific skills. They’re not going to train her like The New Life Program did for me. They’re going to use her how they can, immediately. *As a test subject.*” The tears were breaking through now, and my knees threatened to buckle beneath me. “Did you know that? Do you care? Are you that desperate for a cure-”

Her face was still, as though it was an inanimate replica from the 3D printer. Yet her eyes were fogged with tears.

“Why are you crying?” My own voice broke, the question quaking at the end. “What do you have to cry about? You chose to give her away. You chose their lie over her life. What the hell do you have to cry for?”

Her shoulders were shaking, and she pulled at her fingers. She didn’t raise her hands to wipe her face.

Her tears were like steam in my blood, boiling through me until I crashed madly against the wall. I wanted to break through, to wipe them off of her face, perhaps by peeling back her skin.

“What right do you have to cry?” I felt as though my body would shatter with each throbbing impact. “How could you send her away? How could you let them take her? You’ll never see her again! You’ll be alone! You’ll be alone!”

I could hear a faint hum in the background, a buzz between our sobs. “No, you wouldn’t be completely alone.” Her eyes met mine for the first time, widening so that the last of her tears spilled out. I threw the bag over my shoulder and sprinted out of the small room, darting around the side of the house. At last, I heard my mother speak, letting out a cry after me.

I dropped the bag on the grass as I reached the side of the house. Propping my foot on the windowsill, I pulled myself up the side of the house. Just on the edge of the roof, our satellite dish sat, its face turned toward the sun. It almost reminded me of my mother, the way it gazed anywhere but at me, the way it desperately picked up signals from far-off places while oblivious to the world directly around it. I was going to snap its neck and make it look directly at me.

Just as I reached for the roof, a pair of arms wrapped around my waist, yanking me down so fast my weight fell against the person behind me, nearly knocking both of us over. We stumbled backward across the grass, just barely catching our balance. I balled my fist and swung around. My fist paused an inch from Patrick’s helmet.

His hands moved from my waist to my shoulders, locking me in place as he stared down at me. “You don’t want to do that, Emma. You’ll regret it.”

I shrugged him off, backing up far enough to see that Kristen was a few feet behind him, kicking the grass up with her heel. “She had Jane taken away. She gave her to The Children’s Movement. You know what they’ll do to her. You know what she’ll be used for.”

“Jane is a smart girl. That may not be the case.” I wanted to tear the helmet off of his head so he’d look me in the eye and wordlessly admit he was lying. I wanted to see the sympathetic tears bubbling in his eyes. I wanted to see his lower lip tremble as he spoke the

words. I wanted to see the way he blinked with each breath to emphasize how untrue he knew they were.

Instead, I listened to the tremor of his voice. That was enough to betray him.

“She doesn’t deserve this,” I said, gesturing up to the satellite. “She basically...killed my little sister, in the hopes she’d find a cure. In the hopes she’d live to watch more TV.” I clenched my fists by my side so tightly that my nails stabbed into my palms. “I want Mom to be cut off. I want her to never know if a cure is found. I want her to sit in there, believing there’s a possibility for it, that perhaps The Children’s Movement even found it, through her donation of Jane. But I want her to never know for sure. I want her to be scared to open the doors, unsure if it’s safe or not. I want her to live her life out like that.”

Kristen appeared by my side. She reached down, scooping up my bag. “Let’s go,” she said. “Everyone is meeting at the University now. We can sleep in the car.”

I stared up at the satellite. Its neck craned upward. It didn’t look down at me. It didn’t taunt me. It didn’t care enough.

A sob trembled in my throat, threatening to break though. I didn’t want to cry in front of them. Not unless I got to cheat like Patrick, and wear a damn helmet on my head. A weight settled into my arms and Kristen passed the bag back to me. I held it in my unsteady arms, cradling it by my chest. With a wobbly hand, I pulled the zipper. Fabric puckered out of the opening, piles of my clothing neatly folded one on top of the other. Jane had picked out all of my clothing before Mom sent her away. It was the last thing she did as a free girl.

Kristen wrapped her arm around me, and Patrick joined me at my other side, guiding me forward with his arm across my shoulders. Part of me wanted to pass the bag back to Kristen, in fear that it would slip through my weightless arms, but I clutched it with every ounce of strength

I had, drawing the coarse fabric against my chest. I imagined Jane shifting through my dressers, her pale eyebrows knotted as she selected each article of clothing, considering the practicality of each one. I imagined her considering each memory that was woven into the days I'd carried them on me, the days they'd wrapped around her as I took her into a playful embrace. I imagined her packing her own bag, the clothes slippery against her anxious fingers as she considered the *something* she was finally going to dedicate herself to. The drills screeched in the background as the house was steadily closed, though she knew she would sneak out just in time. She would escape. She would be something. She would have purpose.

I pressed my face into the bag. I didn't need to look forward; Patrick and Kristen were guiding me. I buried my face into the smooth fabric of the clothing, silencing the sobs that shook my body.

We showed our student IDs and acceptance certificates to the ticket collector and were guided to the front of the train where the other students across the nation had been collected along its northern route. Other than the accepted students, there were no other passengers at the stop. However, we were told that the back compartment had a few passengers, collected elsewhere, who were unrelated to Dr. Beckson's lab research. It was expensive to travel by train nowadays, considering that the only existing jobs were for the government and most people's money went toward nutrition pills and superstitious things like closed houses or household air filters.

I headed straight into an open booth, not bothering to visit the other students. Even Kristen, who usually loved to socialize, preferred remaining in our small booth. I sat with my forehead against the window, fighting motion sickness. It'd been too long since I'd traveled and it was a shock to my body. With my eyes closed, I took in the coolness of the window. Kristen's head fell against my shoulder and I didn't shrug her off, though her cheekbone pressed into my shoulder.

The ride was quiet. The scenery wasn't as interesting as I'd hoped. I thought I'd watch hundreds of unique, privately-run towns fly by. All I saw were trees. It was as though I'd never left the hilltop where we'd sat, sipping beer. It should be Jane's head against my shoulder. I pretended it was for a second but just as I sank into the daydream, the painful twist in my chest that comes with Jane's image forces it out of my mind. Kristen and Patrick were all I had now

and no pretending would change that. I opened my eyes and glanced at Patrick, whose face was once again enclosed within his helmet. I propped my feet up on the empty seat across from me, close enough to him that I could feel his warmth too. Kristen said, “Don’t let me fall asleep before the next stop.” She, too, extended her legs toward Patrick, connecting the circle.

I didn’t feel like I was on my way to the Capitol. It felt like a dream, soaring past the expanses of identical forestland. It was almost too quiet to be real. The excitement I’d felt in the lab was all but gone, replaced by the dull ache of the loss I pretended to forget and the aimless fear of what lay ahead. There were other students, from other Universities, who had been traveling even longer than we had. Their booths bordered ours, and we were equals. Perhaps they were even smarter than me. I felt less important now, surrounded by similar students. There weren’t many of us, but I couldn’t help but feel small as we soared across the country, cutting through the empty woods.

The trees broke, revealing a quaint suburb. Other than a few stragglers, it seemed deserted. A few people stood at the stop, probably hoping to travel to a more populated area. There was a possibility their area was so empty, they no longer received government-issued supplies and pills.

“Let’s get some fresh air before the next take-off,” Kristen said, sitting up.

“I wouldn’t call outside air *fresh*,” Patrick said.

“Come on.” She stood up, tugging the ends of our sleeves in each of her hands. “It’ll just be a minute. We should at least stretch our legs. Who knows how long it will be until the next stop?”

I followed her out. Patrick rose and followed behind me. The new passengers squeezed past us, some clutching over-stuffed bags and others wearing nothing but a backpack. As they

trailed in we stepped into the cool, autumn air. Already, I could feel the effects of our northbound travel.

Beyond the stop were small, empty houses with windows shattered by animals or thieves or both, and painted wood chipped by the weather. A ClariStation stood, empty, a few feet from the station. A man in a heavy jacket with an overgrown beard sat outside, leaning against its glass surface. He watched us with blood-shot, vacant eyes. Beyond that, I saw nothing but overgrown pine trees. Acorns crunched beneath our feet as we walked and the air smelled cleaner than our city's. I recalled the air fresheners that used to dangle in our car when Mom used to drive. She used to sing when she drove us to school. I hated how much I loved the smell.

"This was probably a cute town to live in, once," Kristen said, holding herself against the cold as she stepped beneath the shade of a towering evergreen. "I bet people moved here, just to settle down. They'd take the train to the city for work and come home and collect acorns and leaves with their kids. Maybe they had Grandmas that chased them with kitchen utensils, too. They probably would think she was a bitch, back then." She glanced back at us and smiled. "They wouldn't overthink and feel the way we do." I wondered if she were referring directly to me, how I'd mused sullenly over Jane the entire ride here. "I think I would have fit in at a place like this."

"You'd get bored," Patrick said. "You've always needed an audience to survive."

"That's not true," she laughed. "Not a big one, at least. I've done just fine with just the two of you."

"Yeah," I said. "We really only have each other now, don't we?"

“Don’t talk like that, Emma,” she said. Her words took me off guard but her tone wasn’t stern. “If people really vanished when they died, we wouldn’t be bothering with New Life, would we?”

“For some reason I don’t picture New Life living in a simple place like this,” I said.

“You two were so quiet on the ride,” she said, ignoring my comment. “You need to cheer the hell up. You’re about to save the world from imminent death, right? The entire world, history and all, and you just sit and mope the entire journey. That’s a bit lame, isn’t it?”

I frowned. “Considering what I just went through-”

“It’s still scary,” Patrick cut in, sparing me from finishing my thought. “I’ve been living on my own for two years now. I may not have been happy there, but it was starting to get comfortable.”

“You’re the one who just told me comfortable didn’t suit us,” she said. “The train ride will be over before you know it, and you won’t have time to mope anymore. You’ll have to focus on your genius and forget your angst.”

“We’re going to need more beer for that,” I said.

Patrick winced. “Please, no more beer, ever again.”

A leaf fell from the tree and drifted down in front of me. I remembered a time when I’d stood under a tree like this with Miles, when we still played outside. We found a dead bird beneath it. While I began to cry, Miles gave a speech about how common it was for young birds to fall out of their nest before they could fly. It seemed so silly now, crying over a bird.

I was grateful when the ticket collector called “Time to board!” I spun on my heel and moved from the tree, Patrick following. When Kristen didn’t move, I paused and shot her a tired glance.

“There will be plenty more scenery at the next stop,” I said. She shook her head and I laughed, adding, “I promise to be less of a buzzkill this ride, okay? I could use some distraction so please, feel free to distract away this time.”

“I don’t want to be a distraction,” she said, so quiet I almost missed it. Tucking her hands in her pockets, she smiled over at us. “I’m not coming this time. You have to go on ahead.”

“What, are you going to catch the next train?” I teased.

“We don’t have time to play right now,” Patrick said. “I don’t want to get left behind.”

I couldn’t see his expression, but there was something strangled about his voice. I took another look at Kristen. Though she smiled, her eyebrows set lower than usual and her stance was stiff.

“You can’t chicken out now,” I said. “If you miss your Grandma, you can talk to me about it. I miss- I miss my family too, you know. But you can’t chicken out now. We’ve come too far, together.”

“I’m not chickening out,” she said. “We all know I’m not the chicken in this group.” She shot a glance at Patrick. Whatever silence had settled over us, it made my ears buzz and my heart squeeze. “I have to stay behind. I knew I’d only make it one stop. I just didn’t want to die at home, where they’d see.” She swallowed and turned her head, lifting her straggly red hair to reveal a thick, elevated rash along her neck. Before I had time to react, she said, “You have to get on now, or you’ll be left behind. And you two have to make it to the Capitol, okay? We’ve worked too hard for all of this to go to waste.” She dropped her hand and turned back to us, though she made no motion to move forward. “Don’t say anything stupid. Just get back on the train and keep moving forward.”

Tears burned at the back of my eyes. The swaying branches above her bled together into a blur of green. I did all I could to focus on her but the tears spilled silently down my cheeks, uncontrollable. My hands trembled by my sides, caught between fists and the urge to reach out to her. Going to her would probably break us both, so I stood still even though I wanted nothing more than to fall to my knees and scream.

My lips were trembling too much for me to speak, but somehow Patrick managed to react. I couldn't tell if his arms were shaking or if I were crying too hard as I watched him lift his helmet from his head, revealing his tussled hair and youthful face. He stepped forward and passed it into her hands, maintaining a generous distance between them.

"Take it," he said. "I want you to have it."

She laughed and stared down at it, her grip loose. "I don't need it, Patrick. I've been begging you to get rid of this stupid thing-" She laughed a bit harder "-for *ages*, and now that you finally do, it's for the dumbest reason.... You need it more than me." She held it out but he pushed it back, focusing all of his self-control into that one action.

"No," he said. "Please take it. I don't want it anymore. I'd prefer if you kept it with you."

She wrapped her arms around its round, black surface, clutching it to her chest. Her chin pressed against it and she closed her eyes for a second, sucking in a heavy breath before saying, "Please get on the train now. Don't hug me. Just wave, okay? I just want you to wave, like we did at the end of school each day."

We did as she asked. Side by side, Patrick and I turned from her and headed back to the train's open doors. Patrick boarded first and reached out for me to help me up. I hadn't realized until then how weak and shaky my legs were. He pulled me to his side and placed his hand on

my back as we turned again to face Kristen. I wanted her to look a mile away as she stood, apart from us, under that tree. But she looked close enough to touch and somehow that was worse.

Still holding the helmet to her chest, she smiled her familiar, broad grin and raised her hand to wave. For a split second I imagined she faked the smile. But I knew that wasn't it. She'd been part of me long enough for me to know she was crazy enough to be genuinely happy, even in a moment like this. She was probably thinking something stupid, like how much more handsome Patrick was without his helmet, or how we'd be the ones who have to deal with Digi Dog in the Capitol, or anything stupid and inconsequential and hopelessly hilarious and optimistic. Something Kristen.

So I waved back, and Patrick did too. The ticket collector didn't have to bother asking if she would board. The doors shut and the train began to move, slowly so that we saw each wave of her hand and then fast so she flew past us, into our peripheral vision and then gone. I finally crumbled to my knees and curled into myself. I felt Patrick's warmth around me and his tears dampened my hair, the wet strands sticking to my temple. We stayed like that, by the door, pressed in a shaking heap, dry-heaving and sobbing against each other.

No one bothered us. The train workers passed back and forth without sending us a second glance. The other scientists dozed on their journeys, paying us no attention. I almost wished that they'd tell us to shut up or calm down.

When my crying slowed I raised my head to really look at Patrick. He looked boyish and somehow small despite his height, which dark, gentle waves of hair whisked across his forehead. His eyelids were swollen and his cheeks were flushed and wet and he looked no different than little Jane had when she'd found the dead bird. I understood, then, why he wore the helmet. He looked incredibly vulnerable and exposed without it.

I remembered that Patrick had been an older sibling, too. He seemed delicate and young compared to my older brother, who'd joined the army years ago. But he was the eldest, too. I remembered how he'd passed his helmet to Kristen and imagined how he'd buried his three younger siblings. I thought to myself that he was incredibly brave despite acting like such a coward and my eyes began to fill again.

"We're going to be okay," I said. My voice sounded rough from the crying, and I realized how incredibly dry my throat was. "We're going to keep going, as if none of this ever happened. As if we're the train, and we can only move in one direction without looking back. We're going to forget it and do our job, like we're supposed to, for Kristen's sake." My voice shook and Patrick was on the verge of tears again, clutching the back of my jacket. I steadied myself. I needed to be brave, too, and leave my old self behind. Like he had. I sucked in my lips and nodded to steady myself. "We'll be fine. We have to be."

He wiped his eyes and nodded. Feeling that I'd said all I could, I leaned my head against his shoulder. We rode like that, with me in the position Kristen had been in on the first ride, our legs outstretched in front of us but pointing to no one.

When the train stopped again, neither Patrick nor I budged. Outside, our classmates hustled off and back on in what felt like a matter of seconds. Just as the train whirred alive again, I heard a knocking at the booth across the hall.

“Did someone get locked out of their booth?” I asked aloud.

“How would I know?”

Despite my own sour mood, or perhaps because of it, I wished I were with someone more upbeat than Patrick. Someone like Kristen. I shuddered at the thought and moved to the window, squinting out to see a tall, lean shadow shift from booth to booth, knocking and receiving no response. “Maybe they got on the wrong train?”

The warmth of Patrick’s hand settled on my back, a mixed attempt to comfort and subdue me. “Sit down, Emma. Try not to worry so much everyone else right now. Let’s worry about us.”

I sat back down for his sake, though the stiff silence killed me. I wasn’t sure how much longer I could sit and think about the people I had lost.

The shadow appeared at our door, followed by the loose, quick knock against the translucent glass. Patrick scowled as I rose and returned to the doorway.

“Who is it?”

“Can you let me in?” a female voice came. I waited a beat, but she offered no further explanation.

“Why?”

I heard her suck in a quick breath on the other side. “I can’t be seen here.”

“That definitely sounds like you shouldn’t open the door,” Patrick whispered.

My hand trembled against the knob. I imagined Jane on the other side of the door, escaped from The Children’s Movement and searching for a hiding place. Or maybe Kristen, here to tell us it was a false alarm, or a big prank, or some sort of final test by Dummit.

“I have to let her in,” I said. Patrick let out a long moan and I turned the doorknob.

Before me stood a tall girl with a light blonde pixie cut. An oversized knit sweater hung from her slim frame as though she were on her way to a family Christmas party rather than the Capitol. She wore skinny jeans with faded blue patches on the knees and brown hiking boots. But it was her face that made me miss a breath; her gentle brows resting high above her bright eyes. Pale lips pulled into a wide, lopsided grin at the sight of the open door. The way she beamed it me made me feel like more of a hero than the New Life Project had so far, as if by opening the door I had saved her life.

She literally knocked the air out of my lungs after that, flinging her arms around my shoulders. I could feel her cheek press against mine as she smiled. “Thank God you let me in,” she whispered, warm breath tickling my neck. “If I got caught out there, I don’t know how I would get to the Capitol!”

I hadn’t received a hug that hadn’t been pre-discussed in years. Since the illness, no one initiated physical contact without setting boundaries first. Spontaneous physical connection was something I craved during the first months of the illness but eventually learned to live without. Now, with this tall stranger’s arms around my neck, I was both terrified and tantalized. Her warmth hit me like a wave and I was amazed by how, despite her sharp jaw and slim wrists,

there was softness to her body as it pressed against mine. I sunk into the feeling of someone holding me unconditionally and without reason. I let my mind drift away from the train and the plague-ridden world. I inhaled the unfamiliar scent of a stranger.

The door slammed and Patrick stood behind her, glaring down at me. I patted the girl's back and she released me, still grinning. "I'm Alice Stark," she said. "I didn't have a pass to get on the train. I need to get back to the Capitol. If I wasn't in a booth, they would have thrown me back off."

I had read once that embracing someone for more than half a minute released a hormone that created trust between two people. There had even been tests on the potential healing properties of a prolonged embrace. I hadn't counted how long Alice had held me, but either that or something about her bright, open expression told me I could believe anything she told me. "I'm Emma Bloom," I said, "and this is Patrick Sanders. You can stay in here the rest of the way to the Capitol if you'd like."

"You're a lifesaver!" she said, reaching out to give my hand a squeeze. Her grip was tight and reassuring. "I hope I'm not imposing."

"Not at all!" Patrick said, crossing his arms broodingly. "If you ask me, it's always a good idea to pick up strangers on the train, especially in this day and age!"

"Oh! I forgot to show you!" She turned her back to him, pointing at her neck. "I'm healthy."

Patrick's shoulders loosened, but he still let out a huff as he sat back down.

"He's not the best with strangers," I said.

"Neither are you, usually," Patrick said. "Emma's known for sassing the Children's Movement representatives back in our hometown."

“I love it!” Alice laughed, welcoming herself to the seat beside me. “So you’re not members of the Movement?”

“No, we’re definitely not.” I hesitated before adding, “That’s part of the reason I opened the door, you know.”

She seemed comfortable and I wondered if she was used to intruding on strangers. “You thought I might be running from the Children’s Movement?”

I swallowed. “My sister was taken by them just yesterday.”

For the first time since she barged in, her smile faltered and her slim eyebrows narrowed over her eyes. “I’m so sorry,” she said. “She must have been great, for you to open up for a stranger like me. No one else answered when I knocked, you know. Who knows if anyone would have if you didn’t?” She placed her hand over mine softly and smiled. It was the same look Patrick and Kristen had when they took Jane away and I knew, then, that Alice had lost someone too.

“The Children’s Movement is ruthless,” she said. “You’ll see that more than ever once you get to the Capitol.”

“What does that mean?” Patrick asked.

“It’s a bit of a political warzone, between New Life, the Children’s Movement and, of course, the Resistance.”

“The what?” Patrick’s nostrils flared when he was confused; I hadn’t noticed that before he removed his helmet.

“Which one?”

“The Resistance,” he said. “What is that?”

She let out a high laugh. “Oh, you must really be from a small town if you haven’t heard of us! We’re big in the Capitol. Wait,” she held up a hand and shifted back in her seat, “Don’t tell me you’re part of New Life, then? If you hate the Movement, and don’t know what the Resistance is...?”

“Of course we’re a part of New Life,” I said. “We’re scientists.”

“Don’t tell her that!” Patrick snapped. Turning back to Alice, he asked, “Is the Resistance some sort of terrorist group?”

“The opposite!” she laughed. “It’s like the Children’s Movement, minus the violence. Our goal is to get the government to return its focus to finding a cure. Unlike New Life, which gave up on that years ago.” She sighed and, for some reason, turned her eyes to me. “When you’re still living and breathing right now, how can you give up on your own life?”

I clenched a fistful of my skirt, my jaw tightening. “Like I said, I lost my family. There’s not much left for me once my job’s done. We’re living in a dying world, that is a scientifically proven fact, and there’s no cure.”

“Emma, you let a crazy person into our booth,” Patrick said.

“Don’t tell me you’re going to kick me out now,” Alice said. Her eyes flashed and she grasped her hand over mine. “I think, by the end of this ride, I can convince you of my cause.”

“There’s no need to do that,” I said, yanking my hand back. “I’ve done too much research as a *scientist* to waste any more time on desperate theories.”

Silence settled awkwardly over the booth. Alice continued glancing back and forth between us as though waiting for us to accidentally catch eye contact. I could sense fearlessness from her; that is what I had felt during the hug. She was unafraid of the illness, unafraid of this dying world and, somehow, unafraid of her own body within it.

She nudged her shoulder against mine. I jumped, still taken aback by her unsolicited contact. “Come on. It’s a long ride to sit in silence with a stranger, don’t you think? Why don’t we talk? About anything.”

“Like the weather?” I asked through my teeth.

“Tell me about what’s in your bag,” she said, “and I’ll tell you what’s in mine. What we choose to bring along with us shows a lot, doesn’t it?”

“Jane packed the bag,” I said. “My sister, that is. So no, there’s nothing else to talk about.”

“If your sister packed it, it can’t be that heavy.” I glanced at her from the side of my eye, as though there would be an explanation for her words. I forgot, for a split second, that Alice did not make sense.

I snatched her shoulder bag from beside her and began sorting through its contents. “You packed light, huh? Didn’t have much to bring with you?”

“I live in the Capitol,” she said. “You’d know that, if you weren’t so opposed to small talk.” As she spoke she lifted my book, *The Last Choice*, from my backpack. She paused and pressed her hand over the cover before looking up to me. I flushed and wanted to look away, but felt that, for some reason, I shouldn’t. She didn’t say anything before she placed it back in the bag, and that was somehow worse. It was as though she’d discovered something about me she was so sure of that she didn’t need to question it.

Instead, she continued her monologue about the city. “The Capitol functions fine, but with all three parties right next to one another, it’s a bit tense. You never know what’s going to happen next. Fights do break out, there are raids from both sides – not mine, of course – but at the end of the day, nothing *big* has happened to blow it into a civil war quite yet.”

Patrick swallowed. "Why not?"

"Because the Children's Movement will lose its grounding if people see them as killers, even though that's what they are," she said, "and New Life doesn't want their equipment blown up. Simple as that."

"And the Resistance?" I asked.

She smiled. "We're the good guys."

The train screeched and slowed. I hadn't felt the distance between the last stops like I did the ones before, after we first left Kristen.

Patrick leapt to his feet, pulling me with him by the wrist. "I could use air. You stay here," he said, shooting a sharp glance at Alice. "We can't be seen with you."

Despite his tone, Alice smiled. "I'll keep the booth warm."

Unsure of what to say, we simply nodded and shuffled out of the booth. Once outside, we walked from the train, as though she could still hear us. I half-expected her to leap out from the track and throw her arms around me, knocking the air from my lungs once again. I dedicated it wasn't the worst thing that could have happened to me.

"Emma, what is happening in there?" he asked. "If we get caught with her, will we get in trouble? Because we put a lot of work into--"

Patrick's long body suddenly collapsed before me, into a pile of rubble. "Patrick!" I cried, kneeling down to turn him over. "Did you trip?"

My voice trailed off. He had tripped, and it wasn't over rubble. It was over the tip of a mass grave. We'd had government cleaners to take away the dead on a regular basis, but this place was a designated dump, taller piles than I'd ever caught glimpses of in the alleys of my

hometown. A small hand poked out of the pile just a few feet away, as though reaching out to me.

Patrick let out a yelp. "I'm going to get sick!" He tried to push himself up by the palms of his hands, but the bones slipped beneath his grip. "They're all sick, every single one of them!"

Clutching onto the sleeve of his jacket, the air felt cold against my skin as I scanned the piles of half-buried skeletons around us. Expanses of mismatched bones, these relics of hundreds of lives were evidence of the plague, of the futility of a cure.

I sucked in a deep breath and tugged him up with all my strength, causing him to stumble forward into me. He shuddered and shook debris off his jacket with his gloved hands.

We stepped back and paused, looking at the ruin before us. "It looks like it goes on for a mile," he said.

"Do they just dump them here, like trash?" I asked. "Not one person in the nearby town wants to bury their dead?"

"It's not easy work, Emma," he said slowly. "It takes a while to dig by yourself, especially in cold weather like this." I realized he was talking about his siblings and pressed my head against his shoulder.

"I think we should go back inside," I said. "It's getting cold out here."

Once again, we returned to the train.

The train slowed to a halt, though we were a mile or so off from the Capitol. The sudden stop flung me forward and Alice reached out across me, her arm holding me back against my seat.

Alice moved to the window. “It’s just the New Life military,” she said. “They look like they’re returning from a job. The train must have stopped to let them by.”

“The New Life military?” I nearly pushed her to the side in order to get a view. My breath fogged the glass as I searched the crowd. A stream of soldiers walked silently yet proudly down the sidewalk.

“Do you see him?” Patrick asked, pressing a hand to my shoulder.

I spotted him just as Patrick spoke. There were other soldiers on either side of him but I caught his features in a flash, just before I blinked. I saw his short, blonde hair and his stiff, upright form but, more than anything, I saw my face in that crowd, my dark probing eyes and tight-lipped expression.

“Miles!” I cried, smashing my hand against the glass.

Patrick gripped my wrist. “He can’t hear you, Emma! If you’re too loud, someone might come in and see we have a passenger!”

“I need to see him,” I said. “He needs to know what happened to Jane! I need to talk to him. I need to-”

But he had already passed. The train began to move. My hands remained pressed against the glass and I lowered my forehead.

“Your brother?” Alice guessed.

“She hasn’t seen him in years,” Patrick said.

“I never thought I’d see him here, at the Capitol,” I said. “Where is he going?”

“To their base,” Alice said. She paused before adding, “I can bring you.”

I swallowed, trying to conceal my excitement and remain objective. “How would you have access?”

“Many Resistance members are doctors,” Alice said. “The ones who still want to fight for life, but don’t approve of the Movement. We treat the soldiers.”

I imagined Miles laid out on a narrow bed with Alice, dressed in a doctor’s coat, hovering over him with a thermometer. “You treat New Life soldiers? That doesn’t make sense.”

“We care about all life. It’s part of our mission,” she said. “I’ll bring you to see your brother next time he’s at my headquarters.” She bumped her shoulder against mine, smirking as she added, “And while you’re there, it won’t hurt to give you a full tour of where I work.”

Heat rose to my cheeks. I turned away to conceal it. “Why?”

“I want to see what you think,” she said, her eyes locked on me. She wore the same knowing look as when she’d lifted my book from my bag. As though she knew something about me I hadn’t yet told her. “You can enjoy your New Life orientation, meet up with your brother, and then I can give you a tour of what we do. You’ll never fully understand the Capitol if you don’t understand all three parties.” She reached out, taking hold of my wrist. “If you want, I can even give you a tour of the Capitol sometime!”

“Is this how you recruit all of your members?” I asked, yanking my wrist back. “You make deals until they’re forced into being your friends.”

“You’re the one that opened the door,” she said. “You didn’t have to do that.”

“I didn’t know a rebel was on the other side.”

“You didn’t know a rebel wasn’t there, either. And you still opened it.” She smiled. I had no way to retort. I had opened the door willingly, and I’d probably do it again. “I think you’ll like what I have to show you.”

I don’t know what, in particular, I was afraid of, but fear was, in fact, what I experienced in that moment. The way Alice stood, loose beside Patrick and my stiff bodies, as though she would spring to life and embrace me again – the way she smiled at me as if we were exchanging an inside joke, as though she saw some secret of mine and wanted me to share – the way she spoke as if stepping foot into her facilities would transform me, as if I would revert back to a child with dreams of a cure – these things terrified me. New Life was an anchor I clutched onto, a promise that I could make something of my life.

That wasn’t what Alice was offering. She offered, in her proposition, no promise or logic. What she offered was something intangible and abstract that I could see in her thin-lipped, wide smile, but couldn’t quite name either because I’d forgotten it or didn’t want to remember it.

“Okay,” I said. “I’ll go. But I’m not doing this for you. I’m doing it for Miles.” I said it to convince myself more than her because I could feel a tug, a fulfilled desire offered by her words and presence that drew me in just as much as the promise of reuniting with my brother.

She smirked, playing along as she said, “I wouldn’t expect otherwise.” The train slowed as she said it, pulling to a halt at Capitol Station. “Look, we’ve arrived! I was once new here too, you know, and it can be a bit overwhelming at first. But you two seem like tough cookies,

and I'm still up for a tour." She winked over at me as she said it and I rolled my eyes. "We'll meet at this station in two days, and I'll bring you to see your brother. Here." She released me and moved to her bag, rummaging until she pulled out two long, white strips of paper. "You should take my information."

"Is this...your business card?" I asked, holding the long, thin strip with my fingertips.

Patrick laughed. "I haven't seen something like this in years."

"I make them with a label maker I found in an abandoned office," she said. "It's nicer than scribbling on a napkin, right?" She actually sounded proud of herself.

"It's nice." It felt like a lie at first, but there was something charming about the nostalgia of a small piece of laminated paper. "When I was sick once, in elementary school, I had to stay at my mother's work because it was too late to get a nanny for the day. I used up all the paper in the label maker, writing stories to keep myself entertained. When my mother found out, she took me outside and made me sit in the car. But I kept the long strip of story with me and read it until I fell asleep there, in the front seat."

I caught myself and fell silent, heat rising to my cheeks. Her smile softened and I blushed deeper, pulling my hair over my shoulders to hide the red hue.

"We should get off," I said, slinging my bag over my shoulder and pushing past her.

"We have to meet up with our group."

"The New Life Project," she said. "Of course. Wouldn't want to keep them waiting. They all live on a ticking time clock."

"We all do," I grumbled. I shoved my way to the door, our bodies brushing; I tried to ignore the sensation the contact sent through me.

Patrick followed after me. "Hurry, I need a bath!"

Our classmates were huddled at the edge of the train stop. I swung my bag over my shoulder and marched over to my group.

“See you tomorrow, Emma!” Alice called.

I spun around and glared. “Not so loud!” She stood by the exit sign, one foot on the stair as she smiled and waved to me. Part of me expected another unsolicited hug upon departure, and that part regretted that she hadn’t.

I waved. Patrick paused and mirrored the motion before we hurried over to meet with the other New Life members.

Digi Dog shifted to the outside of the small circle to smirk at me and say, “Thanks for showing up.”

I pushed past him, pulling Patrick with me. “Not now, dipstick.”

Professor Winthrop lectured at the front of our huddle. “Tourism is a luxury of the past. If you want to spend your time exploring the city, make it a commitment, because the streets will be your new home. We don’t know how much time any of you have left, but by coming here – on the government’s dollar – you’ve dedicated each of those remaining days to this project. Your life is a job, but it is the job for life. That is what this is about. Remember that, and don’t go off on any selfish excursions that could cost us your life.”

Cost us your life. The phrase sent a chill down my spine. I thought of visiting Miles, of the deal I’d struck up with Alice, the enemy. After years of separation, I’d finally caught a glimpse of my brother, and now my professor was telling me that my life didn’t belong to me anymore. That life, where he was my brother and where choices like visiting him belonged to me, had been given to the New Life Project. My life was worth nothing more what I invented, than what I decided to pass on. Suddenly, I felt a bit like a lab rat running through a maze just so

Dr. Beckson – whoever he was – could time how far I made it before I fell down for the last time.

Patrick squirmed by my side. I could almost see every invisible germ his mind convinced him crawled across his skin. And he had reason to be fearful, after all. In a world where no one was better than a dying rat, I was lucky to even have a maze to run through, to have someone to measure my time as if each second of it mattered.

I was lucky to be a lab rat.

We were herded off the platform and out to the street, where we were ushered into a series of cars. Patrick and I stuck together, slipping into the backseat of one of the cars side-by-side. I sat by a window, peering through the dark glass and into the streets.

Cars filled the streets, people hustled along the sidewalks, and trees stuck up from every patch of unpaved soil, just like in my city, yet nothing seemed the same to me. Every home and store garage was pulled open, revealing displays of mismatched items for sale. Some of the bigger shops had signs explaining the history of each item – who had worn it and how they had died – as a sort of disclaimer. A couple of passerby stopped to consider the items, priced per nutrition pill, though occasionally someone would consider an article of clothing. One house had a stack of books off to the side, far from the center pieces. A lost, younger part of me longed to stop and study each of them.

Each building had blue signs hammered to their front, covering the tops of windows, with white lettering that declared whether they belonged to New Life or the Children's Movement. The New Life houses actually seemed poorer; they were more likely to have garage shops and broken windows. The Children's Movement homes were shut-in and professionally closed houses like my mother's.

I wasn't used to seeing so many Children's Movement supporters. To me, they were no bigger than Tony on the sidewalk with a shitty poster board, crying out for donations. They were an underground movement, a shadow that swept my sister away. But here they were loud and present, visible on each blue sign and each polished, shut house. Like Alice had said, they were a party. They really were a Movement.

Eventually we moved out of their territory. Each house seemed to sag and bodies both living and dead lined the sidewalks, slumped against graffiti-stained walls and signs. A child sat on the sidewalk holding a small sibling; it was impossible to tell if they were alive or dead. An older man popped a nutrition pill as his dog gnawed at a frosted patch of grass at the edge of his lawn. A teenaged girl shoveled a small mound of snow into two water buckets. A woman stood at her doorstep, holding her arms out, begging passerby for hugs.

I looked toward the front seat. "Why is the New Life area so...?"

"The government doesn't put too much money into areas that aren't producing scientists, engineers, philosophers, or someone directly helping the movement," the driver answered.

"They get their pills and once a week the bodies are carried to the dump. But that's about it."

"That doesn't seem right."

"There's no point in feeding money into corpses," the driver said. "They're not unhappy about it, of course. They know very well that it's just time before they join their friends and family. They're just glad they could give whatever they had left to the cause, whether fortune or family. Some of them see New Life as a reincarnation of sorts. They think they're buying a ticket into a new, better life than this fragile mortal one they've got now."

"So they live like this," I said, turning to the window. A woman lifted a sewer cover before dumping a large bag down. I didn't want to know what was in it.

“Just be happy you’ve got skills to trade for a cleaner death,” he said.

“Has the Children’s Movement attacked before?” I asked, thinking of what Alice hinted at.

“This isn’t a tourist trip, Bloom,” Digi Dog snapped from behind me. “What does it matter, anyway? As far as we need to be concerned, the outside world doesn’t exist.”

I spun around, barring my teeth. “It matters because we don’t live in a vacuum and it *is* our job to know about the outside world if we’re going to pass it on through New Life!”

“Leave that to the philosophers,” he said. “Just shut up and act like a scientist.”

Just as I opened my mouth to yell back, Patrick placed a hand on my leg. “I think we’re here, Emma.”

We approached a series of tall office buildings, most with lit windows all the way to the top. The small shops that lined the lower spaces between them, however, were dark with smashed windows.

“Each of these skyscrapers was commandeered by New Life and is used for a different project,” the driver explained. “We have a historical building, a philosophical building, a writers’ area, the archiver’s section, programming, technicians, theorists, visualizers...”

As the car pulled to the side of the road, behind the others, I lifted my bag and Kristen’s into my lap. “Did you notice they didn’t ask about her?”

Patrick’s lips pulled tight and he gave a stiff nod.

I gave his hand a squeeze. “We’ll get you a shower soon, bud.”

We slid out of the car and I slammed the door behind me just as Digi Dog moved to get out.

Dr. Beckson was ugly. His face hung like wet clay. His glasses were bulky and his lips were plump and sagging. His ears took up about half his head and clumps of gray hair jutted out of the sides of his head. He hobbled over to us, his back hunched, and drawled about New Life.

For some reason, I'd expected someone more attractive to stand behind the idea of New Life. No wonder I hadn't seen our leading scientist's face on posters or TV broadcasts.

"In order to remain a member of the New Life Project, one must live by the faculty agreement," he said. "For instance, all members must avoid walking through Children's Movement areas." His discussion of the Children's Movement began and ended within that sentence, leaving me itching for more information.

"We work on the Pomodoro schedule," he went on, "in order to heighten our progress without burning out. In the short break times, you are invited to exercise, complete puzzle games, and listen to music, as all these methods have proved to be brain stimulants. All workers are required to specifically exercise during the fourth, longer break. You will take several Vitamin pills along with your nutrition pill each night in order to boost brain activity as well. These Vitamins are government-issued specifically for your use and are extremely rare and valuable. Failure to ingest the vitamins and any misconduct regarding the usage or distribution of these vitamins will result in expulsion from the Program.

"Our Division Leaders will be calling each of you off by name and you will go directly to your division," he concluded.

I was shocked by how many Divisions there were; over twenty professors lined up with clipboards. The first declared himself the Director of Artificial Intelligence Programming and read off his list.

“Emma, do you realize what this means?” Patrick asked, ringing his hands. “We might be split up.”

“You couldn’t have expected anything else,” I said. “Unlike you, I can’t do technical work for shit.”

Sure enough, the Director of Technical Production called off Patrick’s name. He turned to me with wide eyes and a quivering lower lip, and I took his hand and gave it a squeeze.

“We’re still together in this,” I said. “We’ll see each other tonight.”

“...And last but not least, Daniel Gibbons.”

We turned simultaneously to see Digi Dog punch a fist in the air. I released Patrick’s hand and slapped Digi Dog’s arm.

“Hey!” I said. “I may not be in your group to keep you in line, but if you screw with Patrick I’ll hear about it.”

“I don’t know what lame Division you’re going to be put in, but I can promise you’ll have a lot more to be sad about than your petty hate for me,” he said. “Patrick and I are going to be *creating* robots. What are you going to be doing? Painting on their faces?”

Before I could respond, my name was called. A man with circular glasses had spoken. “Which Director is he?” I asked.

“He’s part of the Department of Conceptual Debate,” a girl in front of me said. “Whatever that means.”

“I’m on a debate team?” I was both thrilled and disappointed by the idea. Dummitt must have nominated me for this department. But I didn’t like the thought of parting ways with Patrick. A flash of panic crossed his face as though he, too, were thinking the same thing. He turned to me and, just as he began to voice his concerns, Beckson interrupted.

“All socializing must take place during the designated break times,” he said. “We’re running out of time.”

“That’s awfully dark,” I grumbled to Patrick once Beckson looked away.

“You will now be separated into your designated Departments,” Dr. Beckson said.

“Please follow your Directors so you may begin work immediately.”

“Immediately?” I whispered. “How can I work at place I haven’t even seen yet?”

Digi-Dog shoved himself into the hushed conversation. “The only place you need to see is your own department.”

“I’d like to know a bit more about the place I work,” I retorted. “We’re meant to live here and spend the rest of our lives here, and I feel like I don’t know anything about it.”

“You know all you need to,” he said. “Now will you shut up so we can get going?”

“You’re the one still talking.”

“Emma,” Patrick said, nudging Digi-Dog to the side to lean toward my ear, “When will we see each other next?”

“I’m sure we’ll see each other during break,” I said, without certainty that that was true. But I couldn’t consider the alternative myself.

Patrick and Digi-Dog headed toward the stairs while I was led down a long hallway that connected our building to its neighboring one. Outside lines of tall windows I spotted a line of people shuffling impatiently from foot to foot, waiting for a chance to voice their ideas or

opinions to a New Life member. One of them, with a blaring red rash on the back of his neck, crumpled to the ground, his ideas dying with him. I quickly turned away.

I was led into a large conference room. A series of long desks aligned in a semi-circle framed the front of the room. The majority of the desks in the semi-circle were already occupied, while the rest of the room was empty. The Director gestured to the few remaining seats at the front of the room. “Debaters, please take an empty seat at the front of the room. Once you are situated, we will bring in the citizens related to today’s topic of interest. Newcomers, feel free to observe silently until you understand procedure enough to contribute.”

I shuffled forward with the newcomers, taking a seat at a desk toward the end of the semi-circle. My body swayed in the wheeled chair and, for a moment, I was scared I’d roll off, away from the half circle and out of New Life. I knew nothing about my new job but was expected not to ask. Training would take time New Life didn’t have. According to procedure here, we had to work fast before our resources ran out – the resources being humans. Death never felt as close as it did now; I felt it breathing down my neck, challenging me to get as much work done as I could before my body was rolled out and I was replaced by whoever remained.

A boy, perhaps a year or two younger than me, sat to my left. Up close, he reminded me of a younger Miles – of the Miles I remembered from my childhood, rather than the one I’d seen run past me the other day. I gathered the courage to speak. “Since the Director is keeping me in the dark, can you tell me what we’re doing today?”

He glanced at me from the corner of his eye and shrugged. “Same thing we do every day. Drag in the peasants, listen to their rants, yell at them about how their thoughts and feelings are invalid, and recreate history however the hell we want.”

I definitely hadn't received training for this. I held my hands in my lap to hide their trembling. "What are we doing today?"

"Arguing about whether or not to make New Life sexy," he said.

"You don't seem impressed by our job," I said.

"I find it entertaining enough, watching these guys bicker," he said, "but I have no idea how we're expected to combine all of human history into one robotic prototype, or even if we should, considering what a bunch of numskulls we are. Sometimes, I think we should program them to be nothing like us, just so they don't end up barking at each other in a room like this a thousand years from now."

His were like a bucket of cold water. Here was this young, innocent boy – and he was just a boy – spewing cynicism and contempt for humanity and the research designed to commemorate it. Patrick and Digi-Dog might think they're work is more complicated, but the creation of the machine was so much easier than imagining how it would cohesively represent all of humanity. Or, like my neighbor said, if they even should.

The selected citizens drizzled in, taking seats in the rows before us. Some carried books or scraps of paper, some had stacks of photographs, and some had smudged scribbles running up their arm. They all had bright, frantic eyes that darted to and from each of our faces, as though they were silently pitching their ideas or implanting them directly in our hearts and minds.

"Today we're discussing physical appearance of New Life, and it's social and historical implications," the Director, whose nameplate read *Director Sullivan*, said. "Topics include sex, race, appearance, size, and shape. Citizens with arguments to present for and against particular physical attributes are here today to speak to us. Please consider their ideas while forming your own. This discussion will last no more than three days."

“No more than three? Isn’t that a bit fast?” I asked the boy beside me, whose plate read *George Zeller*.

“We’re all going to die,” was his flat response.

An elderly woman toward the back of the room rose from her seat and shouted, “I believe that representing more than one race through New Life will cause more problems than anything! If we are programming New Life to behave like us, creating more than one race will only create conflict, as it has in our pasts.”

“I think they should be purple!” another woman shouted. “Everyone likes purple.”

“You can’t pick and choose which races to represent!” a man in the front cried. “You cannot erase entire ethnicities from history!”

“We’re dying anyway!” someone else screamed.

“I don’t care about their race,” one man said, “I just don’t think we should make females, because of, you know...hormones.”

“Robots won’t have hormones,” one female, seated near the Director, said.

The man held up his hands. “Let’s not get emotional, now.”

“Welcome to New Life,” George said.

My tongue felt dry and each time I began to develop a thought, it was interrupted by an outcry from someone in the audience. I watched my coworkers as they either jotted down notes, debunked the arguments of the audience, or stared off tiredly into the distance, like George. My mind overflowed with arguments and counterarguments. One person argued that to create a superior version of humans without prejudice, we’d need to stick to one consistent appearance; another argued that in order to capture human essence, we’d have to accept that the robots could be prone to the same social issues.

“We should just program them to be nice,” someone said.

“As if we haven’t already tried that with our kids,” someone said.

“I think this all relates to the greatest argument,” a panelist said. “Nature vs. nurture.”

A series of low groans rumbled throughout the room.

I saw no way how this could be resolved in three days, or how I could contribute to it when I barely understood how to do my job. My thoughts drifted away from the discussion and back to how George reminded me of Miles, and how I could see Miles again if I held up my end of the deal with Alice, although it would mean breaking the faculty agreement.

I wondered what Alice would think of these discussions. I envisioned her in the seat to my right, leaning back in her chair with her feet propped up on her desk nonchalantly as she snickered at the people around us.

“You probably think this is all mute, because humans are going to magically find a cure,” I imagined myself telling her.

“Even if we can’t find one – which I hope we will – I think it’s silly to replace humans with robots,” she would say. “These people are talking about erasing parts of what makes us human, just so our future selves are perfect. I think that if that’s how we plan on representing ourselves, we shouldn’t do it at all.”

“But why should we include all the shitty parts of our history and just let them repeat themselves, if we can just create a better version of ourselves for the future?”

My daydream faded before she answered, because I didn’t know what she’d say. I realized I did want to meet her, just to hear her side of the story.

I would hold up my end of the deal, meet her tomorrow and discover the mysteries of this town so I could talk to someone who believed they had answers until I could find my own. I needed to see Miles, and I wanted to see Alice.

The streets were cool with an early morning mist. I was surprised by how full the streets were – full, yet still, as though the cool drizzle froze the city’s inhabitants in place. I walked down the New Life streets, passing families as they sat on their porches and stared blankly ahead, shivering in the cold. I kept my head down, hoping my scarf could block out the smell of rotting bodies that drifted from their doorsteps. I hoped, for their sakes, that cleaners would come soon and take the bodies away. Not that it matters, though; they’d just be replaced with new ones.

I hated myself for my mission, but I couldn’t resist Alice’s offer. I wouldn’t particularly mind enduring Alice’s tour of the city, either. After an overwhelming first day on the job, the thought of her silly, lopsided smile was inviting. Warmth coursed through my body and I pulled my head from the scarf, emerging like a turtle from a shell, and let out a visible sigh. I knew I was, somehow, making a mistake, but I didn’t turn back.

I felt a tug at my scarf and paused, thinking it hitched onto an old fence or a branch. Instead, I found a small girl tugging at the end, rushing alongside me.

“Sister!” she said. She couldn’t have been older than six. Her arms wrapped around my leg and I stumbled; her grip didn’t budge. I reached down and patted the top of her head, unsure of what else to do.

“Are you looking for someone?” I asked. It was a dumb question now, the kind of thing I would have asked a lost toddler at the mall five years ago.

“Sister!” she cried again, burying her soft cheek into my hip. “Want a hug?”

I remembered how it felt when Alice hugged me the day before, how electric yet comforting the unrestrained human contact felt. I knelt down and pulled the small girl into my arms, allowing her to press her soft cheek against my shoulder. I felt the memory of a hundred hugs sink into me: clutching onto Miles as a girl, wasted, insincere hugs to acquaintances and extended family, the stiffness of Mom’s embrace after the cake incident. The girl fit against me just like Jane had as a young girl, like a stuffed animal with smooth, round edges and big, dark eyes.

“Okay,” I said, patting her back. “It’s time for me to get going.”

“Sister!” she cried, tightening her grip around my neck.

I shook my head against her curls. “No, I have to go.” I wondered, for a moment, if Jane were this lonely, this desperate, where she was.

But this girl was not Jane, and I was pressed for time. Sucking in a deep breath, I peeled her small arms from me and pushed her back with gentle force. “I have to go,” I said again, rising.

“Sister! Sister!” She grabbed at my scarf as I turned, attempting to yank me back, and I allowed it to twist off my neck and fall into her hands. I sped up then, forcing myself to look forward as I heard her wail behind me.

Tears burned at the back of my eyes as I stormed forward, faster than before. My nose ran, but I was glad that the streets’ scents were blocked and didn’t bother wiping it. When I saw Miles, I’d have to tell him about Jane. I’d have to peel her off, one last time, like that little girl. Like a Band-Aid.

I passed the outskirts of the Children's Movement areas, the blue signs seemed to stare down at me as though daring me to walk further. I had no idea what the deeper streets held, and how a New Life scientist like me would be received. Just like in my city, there were several TVs at every street corner, broadcasting government messages. One enormous screen cut into the sky, balanced above an information building just across from the train station.

"Currently, our trained scientists are experimenting with organ transplants," a classically blonde, female reporter said. "If the illness is isolated to one organ, a replacement operation could save a child's life. By swapping the organ of a healthy individual with a sick individual, scientists can determine the cause of the illness, or at least rule out further options. According to the Movement's scientists, it is only through invasive surgeries that we can discover the root of the plague."

A catchphrase scanned across the screen: IF THE ILLNESS INVADES OUR BODIES, WE WILL INVADE IT'S TERRITORY!

The screen cut back to the reporter. "Thankfully, there are thousands of blood donors who donate daily to make these surgeries possible." A second catchphrase read THE CHILDREN ARE OUR FUTURE.

I wondered, to myself, if they were willing donors. Captives like Jane probably endured donations daily, even actual surgeries and experiments. I quickened my pace, imagining Alice at the end of the road.

And she was right there, waiting at the train station. She wore an over-sized black jacket and stood with her foot leaning back against the ticket booth, staring at a glaring patch of graffiti on the pavement. Her soft features and comfortable posture contrasted the gritty, shadowed space she occupied in this dying city. I felt lighter just seeing her, feeling a magnetic tug toward

her as though gravity led me across the street. I was surprised by how happy I was to see her, this strange rebel in a strange city. Yet I rushed across the street to join her.

When she saw me approaching, her face lit up and she turned her body toward me, widening her arms. “Emma! You came!” I allowed her to wrap her arms around me, welcoming my second hug. The physical contact was addicting. I loved how my cheek fit between her neck and shoulder, how my hands could graze and explore her back and waist as I sunk in to her. This hug was different than the ones I’d remembered earlier; every inch of contact buzzed with electricity, and my skin felt ignited against hers.

Her grip loosened and I pulled back, though not far. We stood in front of each other, close enough that as we exhaled the fogs of our breath mingled. She kept her hands fixed just above my elbows and grinned down at me. “I’m glad you made it. I was afraid you wouldn’t come.”

This was like a prompt to explain my reasoning. I didn’t want to tell her about my confusion at New Life, or how lost I felt in the Capitol, or how tired I already was of the dry, washed-out life I was expected to live. I felt like honesty was somehow defeat and merely said, “I want to see my brother.” I said it as if she couldn’t see right through me, as though she couldn’t sense how desperate I was.

“Where’s your friend today?”

“He would never come along for something like this,” I said. “Technically, it’s against the New Life faculty agreement.”

She raised her eyebrows. “Yet you’re here.”

I cringed. I knew I shouldn't be here, that this was betrayal to New Life. I couldn't let Alice know that, though. I could barely admit my confusion and doubts to myself, let alone to a member of the Resistance, whatever that was.

Alice let out a quiet yet coarse laugh. "Knowing that, are you ready to walk into their territory?" Though I knew I shouldn't, I nodded.

We entered Children's Movement sector, straight between the pillars that supported the giant TV. Just like that, we crossed into their world.

Large glass panels blocked the entrances of every house. Few people roamed the streets. Active ClariStations stood at each corner, packed with at least two guests. I remembered hiding in them as a child under Mom's orders; it was shocking to see functioning ones after all these years. Storefronts sold not only used items in the yard sale fashion that was obviously popular in this city. They sold new ones as well, similar to Patrick's strange collection of sterilizing sprays, gloves, and helmets. There were abandoned shops, too: old sub shops, banks, and nail salons. I spotted movement inside, shadows passing through the dirty-crusted windows or forms slumped back against the walls. A few passerby wore anything from inflatable plastic bubbles around their heads to full oxygen masks and tanks, like aliens or astronauts. Every street had at least one medical building, such as blood donation centers or supposed healers. I had never heard of healers before, and imagined women in fortune teller's gear chanting over infected patients. Posters of child corpses with slogans like WILL YOU WATCH YOUR CHILDREN DIE cluttered shop windows. The only thing I recognized from home was the TVs that seemed to appear at every turn, blaring through the streets.

“There are scavengers everywhere, especially in these areas,” Alice said, breaking my awed silence. “You’d better stick close to me, before anyone thinks you’re a donation to their research.”

“Scavengers?” I echoed, hurrying my pace to catch up with her. I craned my neck to look at all the tall, looming structures of the buildings. I felt like a child’s action figure, like my proportions weren’t made for this towering world. Even the architecture, with high buildings and narrow streets, intimidated me. “Why is everything so close, yet so tall?”

“The streets were narrow before the illness hit,” she said, “but they built upward four years ago when everyone was convinced that higher air was cleaner. Some people still live up there, and haven’t been below 60ft in years. The rich ones have nutrition pill deliveries hoisted up through their windows.”

“That’s insane.”

“Most people don’t leave their houses unless they have some sort of business to run. Here.” She slipped her hand into mine, her fingers intertwining with my own. “This way they’ll know you’re with me, the Infamous Alice Stark, for sure. I’m sure holding my hand will be like holding a dartboard someday, but not today!”

Suddenly I was acutely aware of how clammy my palms had become since entering the area. For her sake, I wanted to pull away, but her grip was firm yet soothing. Standing close beside her lanky, upright form as we stalked down enemy streets, my hand linked with hers, I felt a surge of power. Questioning eyes followed us from the windows above, yet no one dared to challenge us. Holding onto her, I was invincible.

I felt like I was gliding until she came to an abrupt halt at a street corner and gestured to the dark, stained-brick shop before us. The brown overhead sign read *Donations*, and the shop windows were covered with pictures of smiling children running through grass.

My heart sunk. “You brought me to a thrift shop?”

“Emma,” she said, her voice suddenly low, “I think you know better than that.”

And in the pictures, I saw Jane’s face, and my stomach churned. “The clientele...they’re my mother, and people like her?”

“There are places like this throughout the city,” she said, “and not just for children, either. Don’t like your wife? Tranq her, and donate her to research. Are you a religious figure that wants to make a difference? Talk your congregation into being martyrs to donate themselves to save others. Can’t give too much, but wouldn’t mind parting with an organ or two? Stop by your local donation center and if you’re lucky, you’ll leave in one piece.” Her grip tightened around my hand; I hadn’t noticed I’d been trembling until then.

My mother sacrificed Jane in hopes that her life would contribute to a cure, and that trend was even more popular here. The store basically was a thrift shop.

“What really happens to the test subjects?” I asked, though I knew I shouldn’t.

“We can only know what the media tells us,” she said. “Few victims make it out alive. Apparently organ swapping is the new thing, as you probably saw earlier.” She sucked in a deep breath. “Sometimes, they’ll take people right from the streets. Not too many at once. They don’t want to draw too much attention to their true motives. That’s why we keep an eye out for your military, and vice versa. Which works out for you, since you get to see your brother, and for me, because you have to spend the day with me to get to him.” She gave my hand a playful squeeze. I felt heat rise to my cheeks and felt ashamed not because it gave my reaction away,

but because I stood in front of a human donation center. Thankfully, I hated the world I lived in more than myself for being forced to live in it.

“Do you ever get scared?” I asked.

“Obviously.”

“How do you deal with it, in a place like this?”

“I smoke a lot of pot.” When my eyes flashed to her, she burst into laughter and winked at me. “There are people who do that, though, in West Capitol. But that fieldtrip is for the next time you want to see your brother.”

I raised an eyebrow. “Do you plan on kidnapping me every time I want to see him?” I was surprised by how playful, rather than annoyed, my tone was.

“It’s better than you being kidnapped by a weirdo from these parts,” she said, giving my hand a squeeze.

“Once I know where he is, I won’t need you to get to him.”

“But once I show you around my headquarters, you’ll come back all on your own.”

“You seem awfully sure of that,” I said. “You don’t actually know me, you know.”

“In this day and age, people have to get to know each other pretty quickly, and it’s not that hard, given the circumstances.” She turned to face me directly, looking straight down into my eyes. I squirmed under the directness of her gaze, but didn’t turn away. “You hate your mother for giving up your sister, because you would never sacrifice someone to save your own butt. You joined New Life because you can’t help feeling useless, and it seemed like the best option. Even though you have reason to be terrified or infuriated by the Children’s Movement, you came here to this disgusting place with me today because you want to reunite with someone

you love, and you have an itch to experience the world around you, no matter how sucky it is. And I know you're a reader," she added, "and you know what they say about readers."

"What do they say?"

She leaned in, a smile spreading across her face. "Readers may not love life, but they love people."

Realizing our hands were still intertwined, I pulled back. "My brother is the only living person that knows I'm a reader."

Her hand tapped my shoulder, her touch so light it almost didn't register. "You'll see him soon," she said. "Let's keep going."

A bell jingled and a woman stepped out from the shop. Her back was hunched with age, and her hair fell in frizzed clumps around her sunken cheeks. She glared at us for a moment, silently daring us to judge her. She darted to the right and scurried down the street. I closed my eyes and sucked in a breath, steadying myself before nodding to Alice. "Yes please."

She gripped my hand again and we traveled further down the street. "I have to warn you: the deeper into this area you go, the creepier it gets." The pathway seemed to narrow as she said it. "In the center of their area is where the real political operations are run. The people who really run this are the ones who are so focused on their cure, they're willing to kill people to get it. I'm not ready to die, but I'm not ready to kill anyone, either. That's why I joined the Resistance." She smiled as she said it, and her hand tightened around mine.

A low, pained moan escaped from a high window as we passed, and I realized how quiet the streets were. Alice's hushed voice was the only true source of sound. "Why is it so quiet?"

"We're getting closer," is all she said.

"Should we turn back?"

“I still haven’t shown you one of my favorite attractions. Don’t worry; we’re almost there.” She released my hand and rushed toward the end of the street.

I ran to where she stood, paused by a foggy window. She pointed to a poster that was plastered to the glass from the inside.

“It’s me!” she said, pointing and beaming. Sure enough, the poster featured a blurred screenshot of Alice wandering down these streets. “Read it, reader!”

I winced at the nickname, but read the poster aloud. “BEWARE: Alice Stark, resistance terrorist leader. If you spot this woman, turn away and,” I swallowed, “alert authorities.”

“Isn’t it great?” she gushed. “I’m like a big, bad celebrity on the streets of this town! I’ve made enough of a stink that they need to *beware* of me!” She held a hand to her face and looked the poster over like a mother would look at a child. “I’ve wanted to take it, as a keepsake, but I think it really belongs here, where they all can see it.”

“Did you not hear the part about alerting authorities?” I asked. “Someone could be calling a human collector right now, and we could be dissected for some deranged experiment! I thought you said we were safe down here!”

She turned from the poster, her eyes softening. “We are,” she said, moving toward me. “They need to *beware* of me, but I’m not wanted. They don’t want to deal with the retaliation, like I said.” She paused. “Not yet, at least.”

“You never know when that ‘yet’ is going to catch up to you.” I huffed, wrapping my arms around myself. “I do have a job, you know, and one I think is important. If I’m going to die, I don’t want it to be because of some dumb excursion like this.”

Her expression went stony for an instance, but then her features softened and she said, “Yet you’re here, with me, when you’re supposed to be at work.”

My voice seemed faint as I asked, "Can we just go now? I think I've seen enough."

She brushed her hand over my shoulder and my arm, her gaze gentler than before. I wanted to pull away, but sunk into her touch. "I'm sorry. I didn't mean to push it. We can head back. Besides," she said, her usual smirk stretching back across her face, "I still have to give you a tour of my place."

I let out a groan. "You're still holding my brother captive?"

She winked. "I'm not done with you yet, Emma Bloom."

The Resistance headquarters wasn't far. We started in the opposite direction of New Life, heading to the outskirts of the city. The sky darkened and, without operating streetlights, I depended on Alice to guide me. Winter approached and the sun set earlier now. It was getting late, and soon Patrick would wonder where I was. Once he found out, he'd tell me I was insane. I had no reason to trust Alice, yet I remained fixed at her side and trudged forward along the road until I spotted lights ahead.

Alice brought me to an abandoned lot. Beyond it was a lit building with a sign claiming it was once called *North Center Hospital*. It seemed fitting that the Resistance, which clung to the idea of an impossible cure, existed within a relic like a hospital.

I paused. "You live in a hospital?"

"Don't worry. It's only haunted by friendly ghosts."

The front door was unlocked. A wave of warm air washed over me as we entered and the quiet hum of crickets was replaced by faint echoes of distant voices and muffled footsteps. Strips from Alice's label maker were plastered over the hospital directories at the end of each hall, guiding newcomers through the Resistance's headquarters to rooms such as Infirmary, Public Relations, Dormitories, and Laborites.

"Anyone could come in here, and find you," I said. "Doesn't that concern you?"

"We want people to come by," she said. "We want them to ask us about our cause, and hopefully join in."

“So you don’t usually blackmail people into visiting you?”

“Consider yourself special, Emma Bloom.” I turned to hide my smile. “We’re nowhere as big as your New Life Project’s headquarters. Yet.” We paused in front of one of the directories. “We keep most of our medical patients on the second floor. Most of the offices are further up.” She pointed to the label *Public Relations*. “I’m head of that department, as I’m sure you’ve guessed. I go around yacking about the cause to anyone who will listen. I don’t care if it’s some middle-aged woman selling used coats, or an actual government employee. The more the merrier. Here’s our Legal Office. They make sure we remain on good terms with the local government – your government. Because we take care of their soldiers, they usually leave us be. Plus, they hate the Children’s Movement enough to let us roam free.” She smirked at that. “We have our Suppliers, who collect stuff for us. And IT department, for when we hack to air our commercials. We haven’t managed to break into the Capitol systems yet, but we’ve run commercials in smaller towns and cities.” She beamed as she said it. “Usually, I’m the spokesperson.”

Her building was tiny compared to the giant New Life district, stuffed with skyscrapers and lines of desperate supporters, waiting to be heard and given their chance to participate. She stood before the tiny directory sign, which was about half her height, and puffed out her chest. Alice waited for my reaction and I managed a smile for her. At the very least, her pride in something seemingly small, yet huge to her, was endearing.

“Alice!” A girl ran toward us, sliding on the tiled floors as she took a sharp corner. “I’ve been looking all over for you! We have a situation.”

Her straight, thick brown hair swayed against her shoulders. She had a heart-shaped faced and a small, up-turned nose between two large, brown eyes. She paused by us to catch her

breath, her flat chest heaving. Alice smiled when she reached us and draped her arm around her shoulders.

“This is one of my loyal coworkers!” she announced. “Tori, meet Emma, my new friend.”

My muscles relaxed after her introduction; I’d tensed when she put her arm around the other girl. “Alice, we have an emergency,” Tori repeated. “The soldiers raided a Children’s Movement location-”

“Emma is here to see one of the soldiers anyway, so lead the way.”

Tori regarded me with confused silence and led the way with at a frantic pace. We passed the elevator for the stairs and I didn’t bother asking why. Alice practically dragged me alongside her. We burst into a large, open room lined with white beds. Only a handful were full. There were few survivors.

“What happened?” Alice asked, addressing the entire room.

Tori marched past Alice toward one of the wounded soldiers, whose leg was tied up by a spare sheet. “The NL soldiers received a tip about a collector and they raided the place.”

Slipping her hand into mine, Alice tugged me through the rows of wounded patients. I kept my gaze focused on the plain wall straight ahead, afraid to look at the victims in fear of seeing Jane’s soft face among them.

“I didn’t want this,” one of the patient choked out as I passed by. I thought to myself, *I understand; Jane and I didn’t, either*, but then he added, “I wanted to be part of a cure. You ruined it...you ruined it...”

My legs wobbled, unsteady beneath me. I hadn't even considered that a Children's Movement member could have willingly dedicated themselves to the cause. But just like I was willing to dedicate myself to New Life, they could to the Children's Movement.

Then, looking past Alice, I spotted Miles. He stood with his hands beside his back on the opposite side of the room, closer than he'd been in years. From the corner of my eyes, every victim's face melted into Jane's features so my path to my brother was lined by fifty copies of my sister's corpse. Revealing my presence to Miles meant regaining one of the greatest comforts in my life, but it also meant reliving one of my most painful moments.

"So that's your brother," Alice said. "Your tour is on hold, so you can go ahead and make good on my end of the deal." Everything surrounding Miles seemed like a blur, but I could feel Alice leaning in to me. "I haven't seen my siblings in years, either. But you and he are close, aren't you? This is what you put up with me for. Go get him."

I barely processed anything after her first words. Alice, like Patrick, was separated from her family, and not by choice. I, too, had family I could never reunite with, yet Miles stood within reach.

Alice nudged me. It was the first step toward him. I closed the remainder of the distance on my own.

Even beyond the growth expected of a boy transitioning from teen years into his early twenties, Miles' features had changed since I last saw him two years ago. His eyes were sunken and his skin was pale like a faded curtain. His features seemed sharper too, as though his entire body was drawn in lines as sharp as those he'd built his future between. He was aged, yet focused.

He squinted at me and I wondered if, somewhere in the Capitol, optometrists still exist. “Emma?” His mouth parted in shock, though his eyes softened with relief. “You actually made it.”

He wasn’t just relieved that I’d joined New Life; he was relieved I was alive. I replied, “You better not have doubted me,” I said, as though I’d had full control. “I’m a New Life scientist, just like you told me to be. Well, kind of a scientist. It’s a long story.”

His face broke into a smile, lighter and broader than I’d remembered it to be. I always remembered Miles mapping our futures, carefully focusing our paths so someday we’d merge, here, in the Capitol. And somehow that day had come, and I was rewarded with his smile.

The distance closed and he pressed me against his chest. I pressed my cheek against my shoulder. I felt as though no time had passed since I’d embraced him upon his departure.

“They took Jane,” I blurted. “Right before I left, Mom gave her up to the Movement.”

I hated myself for letting the words slip out the moment we reconnected, worried they would break the spell cast over our moment, sever his grip and our family. I clung to the back of his jacket, preventing him from pulling back.

He had no intentions of releasing me, though. His grip tightened at the words and the closer we held one another, the more our surroundings faded.

“You can find her, can’t you?” I asked. Pressed tightly against him, I felt the childish comfort of the idea that my brother was still the smartest, strongest person in my world. “Just like you rescued these people, you can find her too, right?”

“Oh, Emma...” He pushed out a deep breath against my forehead. “Life isn’t like those books you used to read.” I felt his throat quiver as he said it, though his voice concealed any

weakness. “I told Jane to stay with Mom,” he said. “This is my fault. I should have taught her for a division of New Life so she could join us at the Capitol.”

“She was going to,” I said. “She was an artist, Miles. She helped me design the robotic hand that earned my place here.” Tears burned against my closed eyelids. I thought of her long, delicate fingers, and the synthetic hand we’d produced together. “Whatever world we create now won’t be beautiful without her.”

He shook his head. “But you brought that hand with you, right? It got you here. That’s her, Emma. You carried her with you.”

I thought of the bag she’d packed – how I’d complained about its weight, and how Alice argued that if Jane had packed it, it couldn’t be too heavy. If I carried Jane with me – if her vision and talents now rested on my shoulders and it was my responsibility to pass them on – how did that relate to my role at New Life? While people argued about broad ideas like the color and gender of New Life, how could I insert something as significant as Jane’s existence into the debate?

“You came here to find me?” Miles asked, gently guiding us away from the subject of Jane, “Rather than my barracks?”

“I was with Alice.” I glanced back at her. She nodded along to something Tori said, but her eyes flicked toward me. When she saw I was looking, she smiled softly and turned back to Tori. “She said I could see you if I came along for a tour of the city and her place.”

He frowned. “You shouldn’t have done that. You could be snatched up just as easily as any of the people in this room.” He gestured to the beds. “All of your work would be for nothing, and it would cost New Life.”

“You’re here, too,” I reminded him.

“We have an alliance,” he said in a hushed voice. “New Life doesn’t put funding into medicine. We come here to-”

“-To preserve lives, yours and the people you rescue,” I finished.

“The politics are very complicated and, frankly, fragile,” he said. “The Children’s Movement is far more dangerous than you can imagine. An alliance with a small, inconsequential group like this will do nothing but help New Life. But you need to stay out of these politics. They don’t concern you, and can only get you hurt. Being with Alice Stark, or any of her colleagues, places you and your position at New Life in danger. You shouldn’t be here right now.”

“Don’t you think I’ve grown enough for you not to lecture me anymore?” I teased.

“Don’t derail the conversation,” he said.

I couldn’t help but laugh and, as my chest lightened, I realized I was lucky to have anyone left to call family.

“We were leaving from here soon,” he said. “I’ll walk you back to the city. You need to return to your post.”

“I know, I know,” I said, “But I need to say goodbye to Alice before we leave.”

His eyebrows narrowed. “Do not create an alliance with the Resistance, Emma. You do not have time to be here when you have duties at New Life. There is nothing here for you.”

“I saw you, didn’t I?”

“Besides this,” he said. “After today, you have no reason to return. So thank her if you must, but leave it at that. For the sake of your position, don’t come back here again.”

I thought of the rules I’d been given the day before, how they forbade interaction with rebel groups. I understood their existence was to prevent us from wasting any of our limited

time on anything other than our division's work. Even being here now, I was missing out on a debate, on contributing to New Life.

Looking at my brother and feeling the weight of the expectations he'd placed on my shoulders years ago, I resolved not to return to the Resistance. There was no way my work could benefit from it, and I'd been working my whole life to get here, to this moment, reuniting with Miles and knowing the two of us were making a difference for the future after humans inevitably died out.

But then I turned around and saw Alice, a sweet smile spread across her face as she watched my reunion with Miles. She gave me a congratulatory thumbs-up, flashing her teeth in a broad grin as our eyes met.

Miles gave one of my curls a tough tug, causing me to let out a yelp of pain. "What was that for?"

"Stop it," he hissed under his breath.

I rubbed the back of my head. "Stop what?"

"Being taken with Alice Stark," he said. "I have an alliance with her group, so I know her. And I know exactly what you're thinking right now." Before I could object, he continued, "She makes you believe in your future, as though it exists. She embraces life like it's something she can keep. She makes you think you can somehow turn the tides of nature, as though it's all within your control as long as you *believe* strongly enough."

"Are you trying to tell me she's full of crap?" I asked.

"Not exactly," he stammered. "I'm sure she's very genuine and that she thinks she's doing well. I'm sure her interest in you is..." He cleared his throat. "I'm sure she's sincere. But

you can't let her optimistic vision get to your head. It's tempting to believe in her cause, especially when New Life's society is, admittedly, a bit..."

"Depressing."

"But, at the end of the day, facts are facts, and we're dying out, and fast. You have to dedicate your time to New Life, like we planned. You don't have time to bend to Alice Stark's interests, and to let whatever fixation she has on you, however genuine, guide your course from here. You can't waste your life – and Jane's – that way."

His mention of Jane cut me. "I know I owe it to her," I said. "I won't fall off course."

"Good," he said, pressing his hand to my arm. "In a different time, I would have encouraged you to befriend whomever you pleased. But now..."

"Now, politics matter," I said, "and I don't have time to waste. I get it. I do."

He followed me over to Alice. Her face lit up as I approached her and my heart fluttered. I felt Miles' gaze on my back, though, and knew he was right. Whatever interest I had in Alice didn't fit into this lifetime. Her optimistic, brave hope was beautiful and full of more life than I'd seen since I was a girl; that much was true. I secretly wished I could bask in that light, sink into her blind faith as though I didn't live in a dying world – I wished I could live a life where my feelings could play their course, and I could allow the tides of our interactions to guide our future; that was also true. But this had to be the last time I saw her, because my days were numbered by an invisible dial. I could die any minute, and I needed to die creating New Life, for my sake and Jane's.

"Thank you for today, Alice," I said. "I appreciate it."

“I’m glad you came, Emma. I know you saw some things that upset you, but just remember that I’m here, fighting against the Movement, for people like your sister.” She squeezed my arm. “You made me feel braver back there, too, you know.”

“What?” I should have allowed the conversation to die off, and hated myself for asking a question.

She let out a quiet laugh. “Well, you’re so confident and stubborn and driven. In this city, it’s hard to find someone so full of life.”

Full of life? I was sure I was a walking corpse next to someone like her. I hadn’t considered myself to be ‘full of life’ in years.

“Besides, it’s been a while since getting to know a stranger renewed my faith in humanity rather than the opposite,” she said. “You better come visit me again.”

My mouth felt dry. “Yeah,” I answered vaguely, knowing that Miles was listening.

I had reunited with Miles, which was my goal. I had explored the city and seen what was beyond New Life and experienced the Capitol more fully than my job permitted. Yet now, whatever I felt, I had to leave and promise Miles not to turn back.

I found Patrick in the male dormitory, clicking a controller as the metallic muscles of robotic arm flexed before him. He looked like a child at a toy store, his eyes bright with wonder and his lips parted in awe as he watched the mechanical motion again and again. I made my way toward him, passing bunks and cots as boys and teens and men glanced with tired interest as I walked by.

“Did you make that today?” I asked, leaning on his bed post.

Patrick’s face lit up. His bunkmate, Digi Dog, let out a groan of disgust. “What are you doing in the men’s dorm, Bloom?”

I crinkled my nose. “Just be happy you can say a girl snuck into your room before you die.”

“Emma, I made this,” Patrick said, “and in just two days! I had help from the programming team, but it’s amazing how fast things are produced here. Want to hear how I did it?”

I sat on the edge of his bed. “Sure.”

He began a tangent about the technicalities of building the arm – of the pieces he’d connected, the materials he had used – and all the terms I’d memorized to join New Life returned to me, terms I no longer needed now that I’d been assigned to debate. He ranted about springs and joints and screwdrivers; his day was full of these tiny parts. Mine focused on broad debates. I felt disconnected from him for a moment, as though our work were for different jobs entirely.

While he built the shells we would fill with New Life, it was my job to shape their existence, to decide who they would be and what memories they would be made of. The suspicion I'd had during our assignments – that somehow, my job was in a different league than the rests – crept back over me as a mixture of thrill and guilt as I realized my assignment was the greatest one received from my class.

“And afterward, the Kristens – that’s what I’m calling them – coded and programmed the arm to move. Production is only going to increase now that your team decided on the size and shape of New Life.”

“That’s what you missed yesterday.” I turned to see George Zeller on a nearby top bunk, his legs crossed and arms behind his head as he stared at the ceiling. “Much to the disappointment of a few overweight women who spoke on behalf of body diversity, we decided to stick to two standard male and female prototypes. One size fits all.”

“What?” I envisioned the dolls Jane and I would play with as girls, all the same size and shapes with different hairstyles.

“It seemed easiest,” he said, “and it’s not like they’ll be procreating, so we might as well make them the ideal.”

I felt lightheaded. I had missed a meeting that would govern the future of humanity because I'd seen Alice and Miles. And this one decision, however small it seemed, would change so much about what it was to be human. Appearance would no longer matter. Perhaps life would be better, easier without these superficial standards. But no one’s heart would skip a beat when they discovered eyes as naturally blue as Alice’s, and no one would seek touch from a body like Alice’s because it was comparatively warmer than theirs, and no one would feel the tightness in their chest unwinding when they saw her cheeks rise with her imperfectly lopsided

smirk. I suddenly wanted to see her again and map her birthmarks and show her my chicken pox scar.

“You missed work?”

It took me a moment to refocus my attention to Patrick, who stared at me with raised eyebrows. I hadn't told him about the day's excursion. I silently cursed George for blurting it out.

Then Patrick's eyes widened and understanding washed over his face. “You took her up on the deal, didn't you?”

I bit my lower lip. His voice quivered beneath the weight of my betrayal to him, to New Life. I clenched and unclenched my fists in my lap, guilt clogging my throat.

“I needed to see Miles,” I managed to say, “to tell him I'd made it, like I promised.” I swallowed. “We shouldn't talk here.”

Patrick rose, tossing the arm onto his mattress. I crossed my arms in front of my chest and followed him to an empty corner of the room.

“You could have gone on your own, to his barracks,” he said. “We could have found a way. Why did you go through her? Did you seriously go to her headquarters?”

“That's where I saw him,” I said, “and he was very happy to see me, and walked me back, so really, it was all worth it, and we were able to talk about-”

“-But you made a deal with Alice, didn't you?” he asked. “You hung out with her to get to him.”

“It was only a day.”

He frowned. “Did you go to the Children's Movement?” I looked away. “You did, didn't you? Emma, you could have been captured, like your sister! You could have gotten in

trouble for missing work, and for tourism – which Winthrop specifically said was a waste of time. You could be kicked out if they think you’re not serious about your work. Everything we worked for – everything me, you, *and* Kristen worked for – could be for nothing. You’d be kicked out onto the streets, and then what would Miles say? Your promise to him would be broken. How could you?” His voice quivered and broke off.

“I know it wasn’t fair of me to put myself and my job in danger like that,” I said. “I know you’re scared because you’ve lost so many people. But I haven’t lost Miles yet, and I needed to see him. I needed him to know he hadn’t lost me, either.”

But I knew that wasn’t the entire truth. I’d also needed to know that I hadn’t lost part of myself. It was clear now, with George’s news; little pieces of our humanity were being chipped away and I felt that, soon, I would crumble like porcelain if I couldn’t pinpoint and protect the root of my humanness. The way I sunk into Alice’s embrace, and the way I could almost taste her scent as I gripped her waist – these were things New Life could lose from this one, small design choice. They were something I still had, something I could explore and envelop, if I put myself and my job on the line. It was a choice I would have to make.

“That’s not a good enough reason,” he said.

“Would you not do that for your siblings? Would you not take the risk if it meant seeing them again?”

I knew immediately that I’d said too much. Patrick’s eyes widened and, for a moment, I thought they might water. But instead he clenched his fists by his side and drew a long breath, nostrils flaring. “But why did you have to go with her? Don’t tell me you’re interested in the Resistance.”

“I wanted to see the city,” I said. “Don’t you want to know what world we live in? Don’t you want to exist here, while you still can? Or are you content dying early like the rest of the world, even if you’re still breathing?”

“We’re creating life. What is deadening to you about that?”

“I just don’t get how I’m expected to create life when I haven’t experienced it,” I said. “We’re just kids, Patrick.”

He shook his head. “We were never kids, Emma. This is our life.”

“You don’t get what my job is like,” I said. “You have rubrics. You get to base your work off of carefully designed blueprints and instructions, and just make arm after arm like you’re part of an assembly line.” I spoke with my arms flying about me, each word accentuated with the flick of my wrist. “But I have to decide what that arm means, and what it can do, and what it will create, someday, when you’re done creating it. I have to decide who will be attached to it, and how they will think and feel, and how they are like us and *should* they be like us. How am I supposed to figure out how they’re supposed to live if I haven’t lived myself?”

“And what? Alice has the answers? Is that it?” He spoke through clenched teeth. In all the years he’d worn his helmet, I’d never seen his eyes flash with anger, or the way his lips got wet with spit when he yelled. It didn’t upset me, to see him like this; it just made me sad that I’d never seen it before, all these years, while he hid beneath a protective mask from the diseased world around him.

“I don’t know,” I said, truthfully. My arms rested back by my sides and I glanced away, my gaze resting on a small crack in the wall behind him. “But I know she’s alive, like no one I’ve met in years. She’s alive, and she’s not afraid of it. And I just...I want to know why. I feel

like if I know why, I'll have an answer for everything. I feel like I'll know what to do for New Life."

"But the other partiers are wrong. We know that. That's why we joined New Life together, me and you. I want a cure more than anything, but we're all dying, and I'm scared. I'm scared shitless, but New Life is giving me something I can do before I go. I'm going to die, and soon. And so are you. And you can't spend that time trying to find yourself with a girl you barely know." He sucked in a deep breath. "You have to promise me you won't see her again."

I looked back up at Patrick, meeting his eyes. Miles had said the same thing. Alice herself said that one day she would bring me more trouble than anything. Yet there was promise in her, promise in the way she breathed life into the air around her and hugged a stranger like me because, in the moment, she felt like it. How often did people, nowadays, act on feeling rather than fear? If I let her go – if I gave up on her now – I'd be missing something. That might be okay; I was missing plenty now: my sister, Kristen, the prospect of old age, my ability to dream a future for myself. But right now, my heart still beat inside me, alive and loud. And right now, I still had the ability to choose.

"I'm still a member of New Life," I said. "I still work here, and I always plan to. But I can't promise I won't see her."

Patrick's lips curled tightly and his hands shook at his sides. "Then I can't promise I'll support you," he said. "I hope you change your mind."

"You're right. We're still kids," I said. "But I hope that someday, you're not as afraid as you are right now."

And with that I turned and left, dashing past Digi Dog, past George Zeller, past all the confused glances and away from Patrick.

The next time we met, she came to me.

Each day there were people waiting outside, some who had traveled across the country to bring a story or argument they believed to be important to New Life. Some waited days, camping out in the line to be heard, while others were new faces, people passing through for their chance before they died. I walked by them each day on my way to the debate room, the silent stories in their eyes haunting me as I realized few would be heard.

It wasn't uncommon for people to rap on the window for my attention, as though I would stop to hear their thoughts and carry them into the debate room if they couldn't. But the first time I stopped was when I noticed a mop of short blonde hair in my peripheral vision. Alice stood, pressed against the glass with a wide grin on her face. She waved like a child from a school bus window and I couldn't help but laugh.

“What are you doing here?”

“I came to see you of course.” Her voice was barely audible, muffled by the glass. “It's been four days which, in our fleeting era, is basically four years. I figured you were dead or avoiding me.”

“I'm tied up.” I pressed my hand against the glass so our palms were lined up. It felt like a reflex, but I realized it was the first time I'd initiated contact with her rather than the other way around. My throat felt dry as I admitted aloud, “I've wanted to see you, too.”

I had risked my friendship with Patrick for this, after all. After returning to my bunk that night after speaking to Patrick, I tossed and turned, unable to sleep – but in those rare moments I drifted off, I dreamt Alice was beside me, running comforting circles on my back and promising me Patrick and I would survive long enough to come to a compromise. I'd wanted nothing more than to sneak off and see her, as though she held some answer or solution in her lopsided grin. Now that she had come for me, I knew the feeling was mutual; my heart skipped a beat.

“Will you come with me tonight?” she asked. “There's still more I want to show you.”

A lump rose in my throat before I built up the courage to ask, “Is this one of those dates my mother warned me about?”

Her eyes lit up. “I'd love to take credit for taking you on your first date.”

I frowned. “I bet you've never been on one either.”

“No,” she admitted, “but it's always been on my bucket list. I doubt you even have a bucket list, New Lifer.”

“I don't, but I still accept your offer,” I said, “for whatever you have planned. And you better appreciate it, because I could get in trouble if I was caught leaving New Life territory.”

She smirked. “Ah, a forbidden date. There's another one off the bucket list.”

I rolled my eyes, though I laughed. “I'll meet you at the train station tonight. You better be there by the time I arrive.”

“I would never be late for your first date.”

“*Our* first date.”

I meant it as a teasing correction, but the weight of the words fell over us; our eyes met, and we fell quiet. Alice's mouth opened slightly, caught between a round-lipped look of awe and a grin, and her eyes gleamed. My hand trembled against the glass, and I lowered it to my

side. All jokes aside, what we were doing meant something I never thought I'd have the chance to experience, something so ridiculously indulgent it hadn't even crossed my mind as possible. I hadn't considered terms like *crush* or *date* since Miles was a pubescent teen and I'd caught him talking to a girl in his class. Yet here I was.

Today's debate centered around how to source historical information, and whether some or all of history should be included. George yawned beside me as historians stalked in, ranting about certain textbook series or online archives, debating on which sources to trust New Life with. Should synthetic beings be programmed with all of human history stored within them? Should they be left the information and decide whether or not to program it into themselves? Should we censor some parts so they aren't replicated by synthetic life?

The questions were broad and overwhelming, and I had difficulty concentrating. My mind swarmed with possibilities and I sensed, once again, that I didn't know enough to make an educated choice. I found myself uncharacteristically silent, assuring myself this debate still had a few days, that I would have a chance to redeem myself and do something meaningful. But I didn't know how.

Late that evening, when work finished, I rushed to the train station. As expected, Alice waited for me. As I approached her, I noticed she was chalking *Join the Resistance* onto the sidewalk. For a moment I felt strange, as though I should turn back, but then she raised her head I was pulled in, unable to walk away.

"I have something for you," she said, digging into one of the large pockets of her jacket. She pulled out a small, white jar. "I figured I couldn't come empty-handed if it was meant to be a proper first date."

"Pretzel flavored nutrition pills," I said, reading the label. "I have to ask. Why pretzels?"

“Back when we used to eat, like normal people, I never craved pretzels,” she explained, “but whenever I did eat them, I loved it. And then I’d forget that feeling the moment I finished, and never crave them until I ate them again.” She passed the bottle into my hands. “I didn’t want to forget that feeling. It’s such a better feeling than indulging in something you know you love. It’s the feeling of forgetting you were in love, and falling into it all over again.”

I rolled the bottle over in the palm of my hand. I experienced her explanation as though I were remembering a dream, full and vibrant, that I had lost on waking up. I had forgotten what pretzels were and, however insignificant they were, the realization terrified me. Even though it was my job to preserve humanity through synthetic life, I had forgotten part of myself, part of humanity, so easily, as though it had slipped through a tiny crack in my conscious.

I thought, for a moment, of Butterscotch. “Thank you,” I said. “A modern, sweet gift.”

“Technically salty.”

“Shut up. You knew what I meant.”

She reached for my hand. “Do you want to see what I have planned for you?”

“There aren’t any movies out, so I am curious,” I joked.

“This is better than a movie ever was,” she said. “This is the beautiful insanity that is real life.”

I raised an eyebrow. “You’re bringing me somewhere super weird, aren’t you?”

“I know it’s a bit much for a first date, but I’m bringing you to church. Two, to be exact.”

“Are you religious?”

She shook her head. “I think it’s important to see what people have created over the past few years. It shows what happens when you put humans in a pressure cooker. I’m fascinated by it and since you’re secretly a reader, I know you will be, too.”

“If you say so,” I said, though I was intrigued. It had been years since I’d gone to a mass. Mom used to bring us occasionally, but she easily chose hiding inside over public worship.

Alice led me around the outskirts of the Children’s Movement this time, weaving through narrow, residential streets past garage vendors and children chasing one another to ClariStations to watch the sunset. Her hand pressed against my back as we walked and I leaned into her.

Arriving at the first church broke through the simplicity of our quiet walk. Painted in bright lines along the side of the brick building were the words: WE WILL NOT FORGIVE HIM. Long, faded gashes cut through the lettering, as though someone had attempted to scrub off the graffiti and failed. The phrase burned against my eyes so even when I shut them, I saw the red letters dancing behind my eyelids.

“We’re not going inside this one,” she said, “but we’ll watch by the window.”

I swallowed, my throat dry. “Do you come here often?”

“When I’m on one of my PR rampages, I find little gems like this place,” she said.

We knelt down, our knees scraping against the rough dirt that choked a few lonely pieces of grass. The window was fogged with years of neglect and Alice pulled it open so the voices from inside drifted through the crack.

Through the window I saw a small, crammed church with mismatched chairs for pews and a wooden table with a shrunken tablecloth for an altar. The seats were filled with people dressed in black. There was no music or color, just faded wood, black, and the sound of muffled sobbing.

“Our community’s third loss this week was Allyssa Franklin,” a man before an altar read from a list before him. “Will the relatives and acquaintances of Miss Franklin please step forward at this time.”

Four people stood and shuffled forward to stand before the altar.

“Do any one of you have any plausible explanation as to why God chose to take Miss Franklin’s life?” the man asked, barely raising his eyes from the paper.

An older woman pressed her teary cheeks into her sleeve. The man to her right cleared his throat. “I found a jar of nutrition pills in Allyssa’s room. They were hidden beneath her mattress. She may have been keeping them secret, in case we ran out and she needed some for herself. It’s possible the Lord punished her for her selfishness.”

A younger girl spoke up, adding, “Allyssa seemed to be constantly agitated since her sister’s death. It’s possible she doubted the Lord’s choice, and this is why he took her next.”

“Note these reasons, congregation,” the man at the altar said, “in order to avoid facing the Lord’s wrath yourself.”

I turned to Alice. “They meet every day with a list of the dead and invent reasons why God killed them? What kind of church is this?”

“A modern one,” she said. “People are looking for answers, reasons why their loved ones are dying. And they’re looking for ways to save themselves.”

“This is sick,” I said, frowning.

I must have spoken too loud, because the congregation’s leader looked up to the window and spotted us. “You again!” he cried, glaring at Alice.

“Again?” I murmured, shooting her a sideways glance.

“I find them to be both sad and fascinating,” she said with a shrug.

“Doubter,” the man shouted, “the Lord will find you soon.”

Alice gave him a nod and smirked as she rose, guiding me away. “They smite me every time I visit. But I haven’t died yet.”

“Not yet,” I echoed.

“I promise the next one isn’t quite as depressing, but I thought you should see that,” she said. “I’d be lying to you if I only showed you the good. After all, if I were a liar, I’m sure the Lord would have taken me by now.”

I shook my head but couldn’t help but laugh.

The next church was only a street over. It was a white, residential house and if it weren’t for the large, cross-shaped sign out front, I never would have recognized it as a church. Music traveled out into the streets along with the sound of clapping.

“Are they dancing?” I asked, my mouth falling open.

“Here’s the other side of things,” she said, slipping her hand into mine. “Let’s go.”

Walking to the beat of the music, she led me through the open doorway. Inside, a cluster of people in bright, mismatched outfits clapped their hands as live musicians began their tune.

“...And we all, present and absent, thank you for coming today on behalf of our church,” a woman at the front said. She stood on top of a fold-out chair and spoke with one arm open to the room. “Let us celebrate in honor of those whose great deeds on Earth have deemed them worthy of passing on to Paradise and pray that we, too, may be taken soon.”

The congregation erupted into cheers and a shiver ran up my spine. “They’re celebrating death?” I whispered, glancing up at Alice.

To my surprise a broad grin spread across her face as her bright eyes watched the people begin to move to the music. “But isn’t it kind of beautiful?”

I turned back to the people. Some stood at the back, choking on mournful tears though their cheeks stretched into broad smiles. An elderly woman threw her arms around a friend's shoulders and they laughed, swaying unsteadily to the rhythm. Children stomped to the beat of the drums, oblivious to the celebration's implications but thrilled nonetheless. It was so strange to me that the other church – which feared death and wished to survive – was so bleak, while this one – which embraced death as though it were a blessing – seemed so lively.

“I don't get it,” I said. “You're desperate for a cure, so how do you get this celebration of death?”

“The other congregation is so terrified of death that it consumes them, and everything they do,” she said. I thought of my mother. “But this one lives so freely, even though they accept death.” She twisted herself so she stood in front of me, raising our hands as she intertwined our fingers. “Whether or not you understand, will you dance with me, Emma Bloom?”

“I'm not very good.”

“No one here is,” she said, nodding back at a middle-aged man who swung his hips as his arms flailed about his head. “That's not the point.”

I gave a nod and she slid her hands around my waist, her touch soft but firm as she drew me toward her. I slinked my arms around her shoulders. The drums picked up and the beat radiated through the floorboards and buzzed against our feet. And as we drew closer our pulses pounded in unison, a hot, loud rhythm of two bodies sinking together. Her fingers pressed into the soft skin around my hips as we began to move. I leaned forward. I'd never felt someone's body react to mine before, never experienced what it was like to almost melt into someone, but still *almost* yet not quite, because the friction between two foreign bodies drawn together like

hesitant magnets created a heated spark. I wanted to press our bodies together just to feel the contours of her curves and to hear her gasp against mine.

The music grew louder still and our pace quickened. We spun across the room as people clapped and stomped around us, as they leapt and slid and collided. Their bodies moved past mine and their laughter tickled my ears yet it was Alice I clung on to, Alice who shared the scene with me as we giggled and clutched onto one another as the world around us became a colorful blur with each spin.

“They made it,” the leading woman said over the music, “they’ve made it on to the better part of their journey and soon we, too, will find them and our salvation.”

The music hit its loudest note and then the sound dropped and we all came to a halt, breathless and giggly. People applauded and wiped beading tears from their eyes, embraced one another and planted kisses on cheeks. I pressed my head against Alice’s shoulder for a moment, taking the collective pause as an excuse not to let go as I caught my breath.

“You’re right,” I said, laughing against her. “It makes no sense, but it’s beautiful, too.”

Her hand hesitantly left my side to brush against the top of my curls. A tingle ran up my spine. “I told you so, didn’t I? The city is worth exploring because for everyone one of those brick churches, there’s a white one.”

We drew back from one another, our eyes locked. Our cheeks were flushed with color and our eyes were bright. Her hand lingered in my hair for a moment before dropping back to her side. I missed her touch the moment it was lost.

“Let’s go outside,” she said. “These sweaty saints are starting to smell.”

I laughed and nodded, shuffling through the door with her and out into the cool, night air. We wandered over uneven grass into a small field in the wide yard behind the church, just above

a sloping hill. Above the stars peeked out through the dark blue sky. Alice fell back, gazing into the darkening sky. I sucked in a deep breath and fell beside her, close enough that our arms grazed.

“Why do you think we’re dying?” I asked.

She let out a choked laugh. “What do you mean?”

“The people in the churches believe it’s God’s work, for one reason or another,” I said.

“Do you think that, too?”

“You’re the scientist,” she said. “What do you think?”

“The Earth is probably sick of us,” I said, “and wants to start over.”

“Then isn’t it a bit cruel to clutter it with robots?”

“I’d say it’s ruder to try and save humans if the Earth obviously doesn’t like us anymore.” I hesitated before asking, “Alice, do you really think you’ll find a cure?”

“Of course I do,” she said, gazing up into the sky. “If I believe anything about humans, it’s that we have a passion to survive.”

We can survive through New Life, I thought, though I didn’t say it.

“What made you join the Resistance?” I asked.

“I lived on my own for a while before I joined.”

I remembered what she had said at her headquarters, about being separated from her siblings. “Your family passed before you?” I asked, lowly.

“My younger brother did,” she said. “When I left, the rest of them were alive.”

My eyes widened. “You left your family?” It didn’t seem like something Alice would do. She seemed to collect and treasure the moments she spent with people, strangers and friends, as though each interaction were the reason she yearned for a cure.

A cool breeze rustled the grass against our skin. “My younger brother saw his teacher die. She fell right over at the chalkboard. We didn’t let him go back to school after that, and he was convinced all his classmates were dead, too, and that he was next. He had night terrors for months. So I let him sleep in my bed with me.” She rested her hands on her stomach, and I saw her fingers shake. “And he did die, like he said he would. I woke up one morning, and he was cold beside me.”

I wanted to reach out to her, to place my hand on her arm, but I was frozen in place.

“My parents were convinced I was contaminated because I shared the bed,” she continued, “so they kicked me out. I lived on the streets for a while after that, surviving on my own before I joined the Resistance.”

It reminded me of my mother, who was so afraid of dying she didn’t hesitate to give up her children, the only people left in her life. She’d rather live alone than die, just like Alice’s family. “Why would you join the Resistance after that?” I asked. “I mean, why would you want to find a cure after you’d been treated like that?” I thought of the scene at the Children’s Movement, the corpses on tables. I had asked that then, for strangers, but now the question seemed heavier than before.

She sucked in a ragged breath. “I thought I hated people, for a while. I felt like I could die, too, just as easily as the people with me on the streets, because no one had a claim to me anymore. I could die there on the streets, nameless and without a story, as though I never existed. My parents said they loved me, but they cast me out anyway. I realized love wasn’t enough to keep me alive.

“And it was ugly out there, living on the streets. Out there, life was nothing. My only interactions with living humans were with cleaners; whenever I dozed off they’d knock me with

a stick, to make sure I was still alive. Then they'd move on to the next alley. And even in those alleys, everyone avoided one another. The disowned and the homeless – none of them reached out to one another, or held one another, because they were so scared of getting sick just from the touch of fingertips.

“I was once nearly crushed by a corpse in my sleep. The apartment above opened the window and just tossed their child out. Didn't bury him, didn't call the cleaners, didn't even place him in the alley. And that's when I realized love was meaningless in this new world.”

The words seemed strange coming from Alice. “What do you mean?”

“I realized it's easy to love someone, but that love is a luxury of the past,” she said. “When time is running out, there's not room left to love so many other people. So one by one, they're crossed off, until all that's left is the self. I realized, after nearly being crushed, that I didn't want to hear someone say they loved me, ever again. I'd heard it before, and it hadn't meant a thing. I realized I wanted someone to say they'd keep me. I wanted someone to say that they would keep me by their side and in their mind and in their heart. I want to be the end of a promise, part of a seal. I want to die with a name. So I survived, because there was something I still wanted from life. And that's how I became part of the Resistance. ”

Her words sunk into me slowly, odd and foreign and beautiful as they pressed my heart to beat faster. Perhaps this was part of what was missing – the something New Life needed that I couldn't quite name. Could New Life break and rebuild itself like Alice did on those streets? Could New Life understand what it meant not just to be loved, but to be kept by someone, against all reason and logic?

“And that's why I was so attracted to you, Emma,” she said, causing my heart so skip a beat, “because while parents tossed their children out windows, and while fellow sufferers

avoided one another in cold alleys, you opened your train booth door to me and when I held you, you held me back. That's how I knew you were special, someone I didn't want to lose sight of. Then I saw your book and understood that even if you were part of New Life, you believed in something bigger, something human that so many people had forgotten. You risked yourself and your job to see your brother, in a way my parent's never would have for me. And today, you risked it all just to see me, even though you think I don't understand the reality of our world. And that's what I've been looking for, all this time," she said, tilting her head to look at me, "someone who doesn't just love others, but keeps them."

As she looked at me, her eyes shimmering, I felt seen for the first time in years, felt more alive and present as I realized I still existed, I still had life left, and that someone saw that as precious and significant. My body felt heavy, grounded in place in the dirt and grass beneath me, the full weight of my existence falling over me as I breathed in the cool air around us. I was alive, alive enough to discover someone and something new in a dying world. I was human enough to fall for it, to want it, even though I knew we didn't have time.

But love was what required time, she'd said. Love was the luxury. Keeping someone was just stupid human bravery, and that was something I still had.

When I slipped my fingertips against hers, it felt more electric than before, as though each nerve ending tingled against hers. The touch drew her toward me, shifting against the grass until she was propped up on her elbow, hovering just above where I lay. Her pale blonde hair looked bright against the dark sky behind her, but the moon cast enough light that I could see her cheeks flush. I ran my hands over her arms, loving the way goose bumps raised beneath my fingertips.

My stomach rose to my chest as she leaned down, our breath mingling for a split second before our lips met, pressed together before I squeezed her arms and pulled her deeper, deeper until she was on top of me, our bodies colliding our skin burning together. I was pressed between the Earth and Alice, surrounded by the two as though there were nothing else in the universe. Her fingers grazed my hair and my jaw while I dug my hands into her back, drawing her closer with each desperate movement of our lips. Our legs tangled between us, the fabric of her jeans creating friction against my tights. I wanted to inhale her, to breathe her in until we were safe together in my beating heart, untouched by the plagued world around us.

I understood, then, that I wanted to keep her.