

CHAPTER ONE

There's a hole the size of a medicine bottle in my mattress. It's jagged around the edges because I cut it with a butter knife stolen from the cafeteria. No one has discovered it. They never will. Who would think to look for signs of imperfection in such a perfect place?

I look around the dorm for the third time. The plastic masks over the girls' mouths and noses are firmly in place. The DreamSleep gas will keep them under for at least five more minutes. It's not long, but it's long enough.

I pull the cap off the container and shake a tiny white pill into my palm, then toss it to the back of my throat. It catches and I have to spend a minute gathering more saliva. When it finally drops unwillingly into my stomach, I put the bottle back in the hole, replacing the sheet. My father will get rid of the evidence later. After all, it's the last night I'll sleep in the dorm. It's the last night any of us will.

When I lay back in bed, the first rays of blue-gold light from the window scatter over my face. A few seconds later, there's a flurry of sighs and shuffles. I sit on the edge of the bed to pull my combat boots on. The wall dispensers behind our bunks clatter loudly as they release our vitamins and supplements. I flinch hard despite expecting the sound.

"What's wrong, Zade?" a tinkling voice asks from the bunk above mine. "You're jumpier than usual today."

I don't answer. Priya doesn't skip a beat. She laughs. "Don't worry about the test! I heard they're short on servants this year, so they're recruiting for janitors. You can show the Humans how to clean the floors properly. Freemont needs Mods with those skills."

I tilt my head up. Priya Sanders' prim, silvery features are beautiful, even with a smirk smeared across them. Her legs swing easily next to me, lean and flawless. Her mom put a lot of money into those legs. She hired one of the best genetic designers in the city to create a world-class dancer. That's what Priya's placement will be today. I'm sure of it.

Priya snickers at the girls around us. "I really hope her designer got fired," she says. "Maybe he was strung out on black market drugs from the Lower Quarter. I mean, how else could you end up with . . . this?" She waves her fingers at me.

Across from us, Evelyn Meyers giggles. "The apple doesn't fall far from the tree!" she recites in a sing-song voice. I recognize the line from an H+ Industries commercial. It's the best genetics lab in the city. Half the students at Lipperton Academy were created from a string of code at H+.

Autumn Bayberry laughs, too. "Maybe her real parents got her on special bargain at GenQ."

If H+ is the best lab in Freemont, GenQ is the worst.

"I guess they don't give refunds on faulty products," Priya says with a sniff. "Lucky her dad took pity and adopted her. Or they might have mistaken her for a Human and shipped her down to the Lower Quarter."

This comment makes my stomach tighten. I focus hard and take a deep breath, keeping my face motionless.

Evelyn tilts her head at me like I'm a purse she's buying at the mall. "I can't decide," she says finally. "I almost think a faulty Mod is worse than a really good Human. What do you girls think?"

A chime rings out in our headsets. Time to go. Thank the Emperor.

I grab my vitamins and jump in line, making sure to get well ahead of Priya and her posse. There's a crackle of electric excitement in the air as we march down the corridor, but it's hushed, almost reverent. A girl in front of me whispers to someone next to her. Heads flick back and stares burn into her. She closes her mouth and blushes at the floor.

Holo lights flick on ahead of us and turn off behind us like the world

ends at our feet. For most of these girls, it does.

Before we can reach the great hall, our headsets chime again. A honey-sweet voice whispers in my ear, “Your Alpha Test and Alpha Ceremony will commence in ten minutes.”

Great. Like I needed a reminder. It feels like a sledgehammer hitting me in the gut.

For everyone else, a placement is a dream come true. These positions are their birthrights. They were genetically designed to succeed.

I’ll be given a placement, too, but I have no birthrights. It’s not a complaint. It’s a fact. I wasn’t born for a special purpose. My only goal is to survive.

Most days, that goal is easy to meet. Keep your head down. Keep your distance. Take your pills. Be as boring as possible. Study harder. Work harder. Trust only yourself.

But there’s the harder stuff, too. Never get sick or injured. Don’t let anyone see your body up close. Don’t let doctors test you or examine you. Stay home if you have a cut lip, a bruise on your cheek, or an eye infection. My body could betray my secret at any moment.

This has been my life for sixteen years. Seventeen, if you want to get technical—but that’s something no one knows. Just one small secret rooted in a much bigger one.

We step into the great hall. Sunlight filters through a high glass ceiling and falls onto soft pearl tiles. Ahead, a floating glass staircase branches off in two directions to the upper classrooms and labs. Just above the main landing is a hologram of a green and blue globe. It spins slowly, while two double helixes twist around it in mesmerizing patterns. It’s the symbol of the Empire, as familiar as my own face.

My palms are slick. I rub them together, wishing I could run back to the safety of the dorm. Everything will be different after today. Different is dangerous. But I’m just a drop of water in a rapidly flowing river. I can’t stop the flow. All I can do is blend in.

The boys saunter in from a different corridor. They talk and shove each other, the same way they always do. But as they get closer, I feel the tension rolling off of them. They’re scared too, but they’re trying not to show it.

I search their faces for the one I need. James’ dark skin glints icy blue

in the morning light, like a raven's feathers. His familiar golden-brown eyes have bright flecks of purple you can only see if you're standing close. Most people don't pay attention to his eyes, though. James is a born and bred athlete. His arms and legs are corded with hard muscle that's easy to see under his tight-fitted SkynSuit; another perfect creation of H+, like everyone else here.

Except me, of course.

He breaks away from the group of guys and heads straight for me. Evelyn turns around and throws a longing glance at him, but he doesn't see. Or maybe he just doesn't care. It gives me a tiny second of relief from the panic that's starting to overwhelm me.

"Long time no see," James says with a grin that makes his eyes lift at the corners, and my breath catch just a little.

"It's been six hours," I laugh, tilting my head back to look at him.

"Only six?"

I shrug. "Maybe you were trying to forget because I kicked your ass at soccer last night."

"One point is not an ass-kicking!" he says, his jaw jutting out. "Besides, I couldn't let you lose in our last game."

The smiles fade from our faces. Everything will change after the Alpha Test. The first few years in a new placement are hard. Competition is fierce as everyone fights to make it to the top. After my brother's placement, I felt like he'd been stolen away from me. Sam barely came home anymore, and when he did, he sometimes fell asleep sitting up.

There won't be time to kick a ball around the gym anymore. James and I could end up assigned on opposite sides of the city. Or on opposite sides of the Wall. I push the thought away fast, but it's suddenly harder to breathe.

James recovers faster than me.

"I bet your hip is sore after that last save," he says.

I can't help the hesitation, the quick intake of breath. James doesn't miss it. His amusement fades to genuine concern and his eyes drift down my body to my hip. I flush and step back, running my hand over it.

Sore doesn't begin to describe it. I'm grateful for the thick rubbery material of my SkynSuit; it hides the massive bruise shining with all the colours of the rainbow. Mods don't bruise—not like this, anyway.

Their blood vessels are modified to clot and repair fast.

“I don’t feel a thing,” I lie.

I’m relieved when there’s a sharp chime in my headset. We step into our grid positions, spines straight and chins lifted. James falls in behind me. I swear I can feel the warmth of him on my back.

Headmaster Mathers is anything but warm. He stands stick-straight on the landing under the globe, perfectly clean-shaven, like every respectable Mod man. There’s a symbol of a quill painted in crimson on the chest of his SkynSuit. My eyes flit down to my own blank chest. By the end of the day, I’ll have a symbol. Something to tell me who I am. Or who I’m supposed to be, at least. If I make it through the Alpha test, that is.

The headmaster’s voice doesn’t fill the vast room, but his headset picks up the sound and transmits it into each of ours.

“Lipperton graduates, welcome to your final assembly,” he begins. “Your families are waiting in the conservatory. Before we go to breakfast, I want to congratulate you on your achievements thus far.

“Sixteen years ago today, you were released from your life sacs and became children of the Empire. Your DNA is your greatest gift. Everything we’ve accomplished as a species stems from a code of four simple nucleotides. They are the building blocks of life. We have mastered those building blocks. Each of us is a single cell within the living, breathing organism of the Empire.”

“Wow,” James whispers from behind me. “Mathers really went all out on the speech-writing.”

I suffocate my giggle a second too late. The headmaster glares at me coldly, and my cheeks have the opposite reaction, lighting on fire. He continues, but a little faster than before.

“Just like in an organism, every cell has a role. Each citizen must do his or her duty to guarantee our evolution. Today you’ll be given a placement. No matter where you’re placed, your work will help sustain the life cycle of the Empire.

“Some of you will be chosen as artists, the foundation of our flourishing culture. Others will go on to become geneticists, those who create life and continue the legacy of the Mod species. Many of you will enforce our laws and regulate the Human population that depends on us

for their survival.”

Here, Headmaster Mathers clears his throat. When he speaks again, his voice is solemn.

“And, of course, a few of you will be asked to join the Exterior Forces. Those few will be sent over the Wall to wage war on our enemies. You will bring swift and brutal justice to those who dare to threaten our way of life. Exterior Forces placements require the greatest sacrifice. The Empire cannot survive without them.”

A shudder runs down my spine. I’m not alone. There’s a physical ripple through the room.

“Asked” isn’t the right word. No one is safe from conscription into the Exterior Forces. Everyone completes the same basic military training in prep school. Even the most talented, genetically perfect students could be sent over the Wall today. It’s a lottery. But not the kind you want to win.

Once you’ve crossed the Wall, there’s no coming back. You never see or talk to your friends and family again. You become hunter and prey in a war against the Rogues. That’s why the nine Empire cities built their walls in the first place—to keep the Rogues out. But it’s not enough. They find ways to get in. Abductions, bombs, fires . . . They’ll do anything to hurt us. Which is why some of us have to be sent out to fight them.

James taps my spine, and I jump. We’re reciting the Pledge. I raise my left hand and move my mouth in time with everyone else.

“—pledge ourselves to the Empire. We will seek truth and justice through science. We stand united as one people, one species, and one Empire: past, present, and future.”

“In the name of progress!” Headmaster Mathers cries. He folds his arms across his chest, fists clenched.

The students cross their arms and shout in response: “In the name of the Empire!”

My arms are frozen by my side.

“You okay?” James whispers. I turn my head and see a few kids around us staring at me. I nod quickly and face the headmaster, taking a deep breath to steady myself.

I have to be careful. Even today. Especially today. I can’t slip up. After

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the Alpha Test, I'll have a placement and a symbol on my chest to show it. Sam and I will spend long nights in the library, just like we used to. Everyone will stop looking at me with a question in their eyes and leave me alone. And I'll survive by flying under the radar, like I always have.

Unless I'm conscripted and sent to the Exterior. If that happens, I won't be able to hide what I am anymore. I'll be more hated than the Rogues.

I shove the nagging thought as far back in my mind as it can go. It's only a distraction. Besides, there's no point in imagining what could happen beyond the Wall. No one knows for sure. We aren't supposed to dwell on the problems in the Exterior. The Exterior Forces fight the Rogues alone so the rest of us can live perfect, sheltered lives.

On the other hand, if things go wrong before my placement, the results will be terrible and swift. I know exactly what the Mods will do to me—and my family—if they find out what I am.

That is, if they find out I'm not one of them at all.