

ORIGIN

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RAZORBILL

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FOR BEN.
ALWAYS.

ONE

I'm told that the day I was born, Uncle Paolo held me against his white lab coat and whispered, "She is perfect." Sixteen years later, they're still repeating the word. Every day I hear it, from the scientists or the guards, from my mother or from my Aunt Brigid. *Perfect.*

They say other things too. That there are no others like me, at least not yet. That I am the pinnacle of mankind, a goddess born of mortal flesh. *You are immortal, Pia, and you are perfect,* they say.

But as I follow Uncle Paolo to the laboratory, my bootlaces trailing in the mud and my hands clutching a struggling sparrow, the last thing I feel is perfect.

Outside the compound, the jungle is more restless than usual. The wind, lightly scented with orchids, prowls through the kapoks and palms as if searching for something it lost. The air is so damp that drops of water appear, almost magically, on my skin and on Uncle Paolo's pepper-gray hair. When we pass

through the garden, the heavy-hanging passionflowers and spiky heliconias brush against my legs, depositing dew onto the tops of my boots. Water is everywhere, just like every other day in the rainforest. But today it feels colder—less refreshing and more invasive.

Today is a testing day. They are called the Wickham tests, and they only come every few months, often by surprise. When I awoke in my glass-walled bedroom this morning, I expected the usual: reciting genus and species lists to Uncle Antonio, comparing algae specimens under microscopes with Uncle Jakob, followed, perhaps, by a long swim in the pool. But instead, I was greeted by Mother, who informed me that Uncle Paolo had decided to hold a test. She then breezed out the door and left me scrambling to get ready. I didn't even have a chance to tie my shoelaces.

Hardly ten minutes later, here I am.

The bird in my hands fights relentlessly, scratching my palms with his tiny talons and snapping at my fingertips with his beak. It does no good. His claws are sharp enough to break the skin—just not *my* skin. That's probably why Uncle Paolo told me to carry the bird instead of doing it himself.

Indestructible it may be, but my skin feels three sizes too small, and it's all I can do to keep my breathing steady. My heart flutters more frantically than the bird.

Testing day.

The last test I took, four months ago, didn't involve a live animal, but it was still difficult to pass. I had to observe five different people—Jacques the cook, Clarence the janitor, and other nonscientist residents—to calculate whether they contributed more to the welfare of Little Cam than it cost to feed,

pay, and keep them. I was terrified that my findings would result in someone being fired. No one was, but Uncle Paolo did have a talk with Aunt Nénine, the laundress, about how much time she spent napping compared with the time she spent keeping up with the wash. I asked Uncle Paolo what the test would prove, and he told me it would show whether my judgment was clear enough to make rational, scientific observations. But I'm still not sure Aunt Nénine has forgiven me for my report, rational observations or not.

I look down at the sparrow and wonder what's in store for him. For a moment, my will—and my fingers—weaken only slightly, but it's enough for the bird to jerk free and launch into the air. My enhanced reflexes make a decision faster than my brain: my hand reaches out, closes around the bird in mid-air, and draws him back to me, all in the time it takes the eye to blink.

“Everything all right?” Uncle Paolo asks without turning.

“Yes, fine.” I know he knows what just happened. He always does. But he also knows I would never be so disobedient as to let his chosen specimen fly free.

I'm sorry, I want to say to the bird.

Instead, I hold on tighter.

There are two lab buildings in Little Cam. We arrive at B Labs, in the smaller one, and Mother is waiting inside. She wears her crisp, white lab assistant's coat and is pulling on latex gloves. They snap against her wrists.

“Is everything ready, Sylvia?” Uncle Paolo asks.

She nods and leads the way, passing door after door. We finally stop in front of a small, rarely used lab near the old wing, which was destroyed in a fire years ago. The door to the

ruined hall is locked, and from the rust on the doorknob I can tell it hasn't been opened in years.

Inside the lab, metal shelves and cabinets and sinks line the walls, and they all catch and distort my reflection. In the center of the room is a small aluminum table, with two chairs on either side and a metal cage on its surface.

"Put subject 557 inside," Uncle Paolo says, and I release the bird into the cage, which is just large enough for him to fly in a tight circle. He throws himself at the metal grate, then lands, wings spread awkwardly, on the bottom. After a moment he launches up again, beating his wings determinedly against his captivity.

Then I notice the wires snaking from the cage to the table, down and across the floor, to a small generator under the emergency eyewash station.

I miss a breath, then glance at Uncle Paolo to see if he noticed. He didn't. He's filling out some forms on a clipboard.

"All right, Pia," he says as his pen scratches away. The bird lands again, takes off, clutches the side of the cage with his small talons. Uncle Paolo hands me the clipboard. "Take a seat. Good. Did you bring a pen?"

I didn't, so he gives me his and pulls another from his coat pocket. "What do I do?" I ask.

"Take notes. Measure everything. This particular test subject has been given periodic doses of a new serum I've been developing with *suma*."

Suma. Pfaffia paniculata, a common enough stimulant, but there are probably dozens of uses for it we haven't discovered yet. "So . . . we're testing to see if the subject handles

the . . . stress of this test better than an untreated control subject.”

“Right,” he says with a smile. “Excellent, Pia. This serum—I call it E13—should kick in when the bird has exhausted the last of its strength, giving it another few minutes of energy.”

I nod in understanding. Such a serum could prove useful in a myriad of medicinal ways.

“No computers today,” Uncle Paolo tells me. “No instruments. Just rely on your own faculties. Observe. Record. Later we’ll evaluate. You know the process.”

“Yes.” My eyes flicker to the bird. “I do.”

“Sylvia!” Uncle Paolo snaps his fingers at my mother, and she flips a switch on the generator. I feel the electricity before it hits the cage, a low vibration that sizzles through the wires by my feet. The hairs on my arms begin to rise as if the electricity were pumping into *me*.

The cage begins to hum, and the bird shrieks and jerks into the air, only to collide with the metal and get shocked again. I lean forward and watch and *see* the moment the bird realizes he can’t land. His pupils constrict, his feathers flare, and he begins wheeling in tight, dizzying loops.

I feel nauseated, but I dare not let Uncle Paolo see. He leans back, hands folded on his own clipboard. He isn’t here to observe the sparrow.

He’s here to observe me.

I bow my head and force myself to write something down. *Ammodramus aurifrons*—*yellow-browed sparrow, usually found in less dense areas of the rainforest*. I look up again, watching the bird. Watching Uncle Paolo watching me. I keep every

muscle in my face perfectly still and draw each breath deliberately, slow and even. I can't let him see me wince, or gasp, or anything that might indicate my emotions are hindering my objectivity. The bird tries to land again, and I hear the snap and sizzle of the electricity. Already weary, the helpless sparrow resumes his frenetic circling.

In flight for 3.85 minutes, I jot down. *At 9.2 wing beats per sec =2097.6 beats . . . flight for 2.4 minutes . . .* The numbers are all reflex to me. The scientists like to tease me about it, saying I spend too much time with them. Once I responded, "Who else is there?" They never replied to that.

The sparrow is beginning to make mistakes. His wings grow clumsy, earning him more frequent shocks. At one point he seizes the metal bars in his talons and flattens himself against the side of the cage, tiny body shuddering with electricity.

I know Uncle Paolo's eyes are on me, searching for any sign of weakness. It's all I can do not to wince.

I can't fail this. I *can't*. Of all my studies, the Wickham tests are the most important. They gauge whether I am ready to be a scientist. Whether I'm ready for the secrets of my own existence. Once I prove I'm one of them, my real work can begin: creating others like me. And that is everything. I am the first and only of my kind, and I've been the first and only for sixteen years. Now, there is only one thing I want: someone else who knows. Knows what it is to never bleed. Knows what it is to look ahead and see eternity.

Knows what it is to be surrounded by faces that you love, faces that will one day stop breathing and start to decay while your own will remain frozen outside of time.

None of them know. Not Mother, not Uncle Paolo, not

any of them. They think they can understand. They think they can empathize or imagine with me. But all they really know is what they can observe, such as how fast I can run or how quickly bruises on my skin can fade. When it comes to the hidden part of me, the inner, untouchable Pia, all they can really know is that I'm different.

They cannot possibly imagine how much.

Suddenly the E13 serum must take effect, because the bird takes off again, circles and wheels, and I note every move, though my hand begins to shake. I see a look of triumph in Uncle Paolo's eyes as the bird beats its wings with double the vigor it had when the test began. One, two, six more minutes, and the serum-induced energy begins to wane. The bird starts to falter again.

I want it to stop, but I can't look to Mother. She'd only side with him, as she always does. Uncle Paolo's pen scratches and scratches. I want to see what he's writing down about me, but I have to concentrate on holding myself together.

The sparrow can't keep it up much longer or his heart will stop. *Surely you won't let it go that far.* I glance at Uncle Paolo's face, but he remains as impassive as ever. The perfect scientist.

"I think . . ." I pause, lick my lips. My mouth is dry. "I think I have enough data."

"The test isn't over, Pia," Uncle Paolo says with a frown.

"Well, it's just that . . . in another minute, his heart will—"

"Pia." My name is severe on his lips, and the wince I've been holding back finally escapes. Uncle Paolo leans forward. "The test is not over. Get your emotions under control, Pia. Keep your eye on the goal, not the steps you must take to

reach it. The goal is everything. The steps are nothing. No matter how difficult the journey is, the goal is always worth it.”

I open my lips to protest further, but then slowly sit back and relent. *He won't let it go that far. He won't.*

The sparrow lands clumsily, takes off again, seeking not escape now, but rest.

He won't.

The bird doesn't stay aloft for more than three seconds before crashing again. He struggles, but can't summon the energy to take off. Instead, he hops raggedly, eyes glazing.

The electricity sizzles and pops.

Will he?

My lips part, and I gather my breath—

But finally Uncle Paolo speaks. “Enough. Turn it off, Sylvia.”

My mother shuts off the generator, and the bird slumps with relief.

So do I.

Uncle Antonio finds me in my room. I sit cross-legged on my bed, holding the sparrow in my hands. He's too exhausted and traumatized to struggle now, and I stroke his feathers absently as I stare out at the jungle.

Three of my bedroom walls and even the ceiling are made of glass. Since the little house sits on the outskirts of the compound, by the western fence, I have an almost 360-degree view of the rainforest. My room used to be a greenhouse. When I was born the scientists decided to convert it into a bedroom for me, and the rest of the house—botany laboratories—was

renovated into another bedroom and bath, a living room, and a study to accommodate my mother.

They've often discussed replacing the glass of my room with plaster, but I've fought them on it every time, just as I fought to have them remove the cameras that once watched me night and day. I won on both accounts, but barely. Since the glass house sits only yards from the fence and my bedroom faces the forest, I am hidden from the rest of Little Cam but still have a panoramic view of the jungle. It's almost like not having walls at all. I love waking up and seeing the trees overhead. Sometimes I'll sit on my bed for hours, staring out to see what animals will pass by my window.

And sometimes I even imagine what it would be like to stand on the other side of that fence. Looking in, instead of looking out. Being able to run as far as I want.

But that's ridiculous. My world is Little Cam, and even if I were out there in the jungle, I'd have nowhere to go.

Uncle Antonio walks to the glass wall and stands with his back to the jungle, hands in his pockets, and watches me.

Of all my aunts and uncles in Little Cam, Uncle Antonio is my favorite. Unlike everyone else, he never calls me perfect. He calls me "Chipmunk" instead, though I've never seen one, except in zoology books. Neither has he, for that matter. Like me, Uncle Antonio was born in Little Cam.

"I passed," I say to his unspoken question, and his eyes fall to the sparrow cupped in my hands.

"And him?"

"I'm supposed to put him back in the menagerie."

Uncle Antonio's lips are pressed tightly together, hidden in

the thick growth of his beard. He disapproves highly of these tests, but he never says so. Uncle Paolo calls all the shots in Little Cam, and there's nothing Uncle Antonio can do about that.

"I'll walk with you," he says. I nod, glad for his company.

We leave the glass house and make our way to the menagerie. Ten rows of horizontal bars, webbed in between with electrically charged chain link, surround the glass house and the rest of the research compound we call Little Cam, where we're hidden beneath the rainforest canopy like ants in a patch of grass, safe and secret. There are thirteen buildings here. Some are laboratories, some are dormitories, and one is the social center, where the gymnasium, pool, lounge, and dining hall are. Twenty-four scientists, a dozen guards, and several maids, maintenance men, cooks, and lab assistants make up the population of Little Cam. I'm the reason they're all here, and I'm the reason no one can know this place exists.

"How many more tests do you think I have to pass before I'm ready?" I ask.

Uncle Antonio shrugs. "Not something Paolo discusses with me. Why? Are you in a hurry? Of all people, I'd think you'd be the last one in a hurry."

Because you've only got forever, I know he must be thinking. I look up at him, wondering—not for the first time—what it must be like to know that one day you could suddenly just *end*.

Uncle Antonio scratches his beard, which is thick and curly and makes him look like a woolly monkey. "What did he say? After it was over?"

"What he always says. That I was perfect and that I passed."

“Perfect,” he snorts.

“What? You don’t think I’m perfect?” I can’t resist, because he gets so riled whenever I bring it up. “I can run up to thirty miles without stopping. I can jump six feet in the air. There is not a material in this world sharp enough to pierce my skin. I cannot drown or suffocate. I am immune to every illness known to man. I have a perfect memory. My senses are more acute than anyone else’s. My reflexes rival those of a cat. I will never grow old”—my voice falls, all smugness gone—“and I will never die.”

“Perfect is,” Uncle Antonio whispers, “as perfect does, Pia.”

I almost laugh at him for sounding cliché, but his eyes are so solemn I stay quiet.

“Anyway,” he says, “if you’re so perfect, Chipmunk, why does he keep testing you?”

“That’s not fair and you know it.”

“Did you ever consider . . .” He stops, shakes his head.

“What? Consider what?”

His eyes flicker over his shoulder before he answers. “You know. *Not* passing.”

“Failing on purpose? Why? Just so I don’t have to take any more tests?”

He spreads his hands as if to say, *Exactly*.

“*Because*, Uncle Antonio, then I’d never be allowed to join the Immortis team. I’d never know how they made me the way I am.” *And I’d never be able to help make others like me.* “You know as well as I that I’ll never learn the secret of Immortis until I’m part of the team. That is”—I give him an encouraging smile—“unless you want to tell it to me?”

Uncle Antonio sighs. “Pia, don’t.”

“Come on. Tell me. I know all about the elysia flower . . . but what about the catalyst? How do they make Immortis?”

“You know I won’t tell you anything, so stop asking.”

I watch him closely, but he can be as impassive as Uncle Paolo when it suits him. A moment later we reach the menagerie, but instead of going inside, I stand and stare at the door.

“What’s the matter?” asks Uncle Antonio.

I look down at the sparrow. His wings are splayed over my palms and his head is abnormally still. I feel the beat of his tiny heart in my palm, so faint it’s hardly there at all.

In this moment, I suddenly find myself not caring about being the perfect, obedient scientist. It’s an irrational whim, and I’ll probably regret it in less than a minute, but I open my hands until they’re flat, lift the sparrow up, and gently thrust him into the air. Surprised and disoriented, he drops a full foot before spreading his wings. Then he hurls himself skyward, climbing high above the roof of the menagerie to disappear into the darkening sky.

TWO

I wake the next morning to thunder.

Above me, the branches of the trees shudder in a strong wind, and every few seconds lightning flares over them, like hot white branches of some larger, celestial tree. The thunder is so deep I feel it in my ribcage.

For a moment, I just lie in bed and stare. I love thunderstorms. I love the raw, unpredictable power shattering the air, shaking the jungle, searing the boundary between earth and sky. The lightning fills my room with bursts of light, making my pale skin seem even whiter. Outside, the vines of lianas in the trees thrash like snakes.

After several minutes, I drag myself from bed and yawn my way into the bathroom. As I brush my teeth, the lights above my mirror flicker. The storm must be interfering with the power, but I ignore it. It seems like every other thunderstorm that rolls overhead knocks the power out for fifteen minutes or so, before Clarence gets the backup generators running.

There's a flashlight in my sock drawer just in case, but it's light enough outside that I won't need it.

After showering and dressing, I jog to the dining hall and snag a bagel and a banana from the kitchen. It's not raining yet, but judging by the thickness of the clouds, it won't be long off. I clamp the bagel between my teeth as I peel the banana and head for the gym. There's time for a couple of miles on the treadmill before my lessons with Uncle Antonio.

Uncle Antonio's main job is my education. We alternate subjects every day, according to a curriculum Uncle Paolo writes out. Yesterday, after the Wickham test, was mathematics (we studied combinatorics—easy). Today is microbiology. Tomorrow could be botany, biomedics, zoology, genetics, or any of the various fields represented by the residents of Little Cam. Uncle Antonio really only tutors me half of the time. The rest of my studies are done under the scientists themselves, with Uncle Antonio monitoring my progress and reporting it to Uncle Paolo at the end of each week.

The gym is empty when I arrive. As I run, the slap of my sneakers and the hum of the treadmill echoing in the deserted room, I try not to think about yesterday's experiment. Mother told me after the last Wickham test that the best thing to do is just to move on. Force the mind to look forward and not backward.

To keep my mind from slipping into the past, I mentally run through the day's schedule. *Two hours with Uncle Antonio. Lunch. Five more hours of studying. Dinner. Painting with Uncle Smithy. Run a few more miles. Swim. Read. Sleep.*

It's a wonder I fit everything in, but even if I had free time, Uncle Paolo would be sure to fill it in with something.

He says the mind is a muscle like any other, and letting it sit unused will make it weak and slow. There's plenty to do in Little Cam. There's the gym, the pool, the library filled with science and math books, the lounge with games like chess and backgammon. There's usually some kind of interesting experiment being conducted in one lab or another, and the scientists always let me drop in and watch or even help. And there's the menagerie of animals that are constantly in need of feeding, grooming, exercise, and attention.

The lights flicker again, and the belt of the treadmill jerks. Anticipating it, I slow down, then speed up once the electricity settles again and the belt resumes its steady roll.

I glance at the screen on the treadmill. Twelve miles. Not bad for half an hour, though I usually go faster. I hit the stop button, and, instead of waiting for the belt to slow, I vault over the handrail and land lightly on the tile floor. I wipe away the few beads of sweat that are on my brow and head outside. Rain begins to fall as I jog to my room, but I make it indoors before my clothes get soaked.

As I wait for Uncle Antonio, I start pruning my orchids. I have ten different species of them, each one specially cultivated for me by Uncle Paolo, who likes to dabble in botany in his spare time. One of the species, which he named *Epidendrum aureus*, is genetically manipulated to be the only one of its kind.

"Completely unique, just like you," he told me when he gave it to me, three years ago. "And see? I've specially designed it to have those flecks of gold. It almost looks like elysia."

That is the Uncle Paolo I know best. The detached scientist who sticks birds in electric cages is a rare side of Uncle

Paolo that I admire for its cool reason and objectivity, but I'm glad he's not always that way.

Outside, the clouds are disintegrating, and no more thunder pounds at the glass around me. The storm is over. Thin tendrils of sunlight creep through the trees as if embarrassed for having been so long absent.

It's time to meet Uncle Antonio for lessons. I quickly spray the orchids with a diluted formula of potassium, calcium, and nitrogen, then grab my bag of textbooks and head down the hall, twisting my hair into a ponytail as I walk. It's smooth as water in my hands. I have my mother's dark, straight hair, though she cuts hers short. I pause at the kitchen and grab the molding around the doorway, letting myself swing into the room. Mother is sitting at the kitchen table, doing sums.

"I'm going to meet with Uncle Antonio."

She looks up. There is a brief moment in which anger flashes across her face before her features smooth silkily back into her accustomed composure. I ignore the anger; she always does that when I interrupt her. "Don't forget you have your monthly MRI with Paolo this afternoon."

I tilt my head to the side and frown at her. "Forget? Me?" She might forget, or Uncle Antonio. But not me. Never me.

"Yes," she says, her eyes scanning me from head to toe. "That's right. You're *perfect*."

As I wave to her and head for the front door, I feel a sudden coldness in the bridge of my nose, right between my eyes. Of everyone in Little Cam, my mother is the only one who never smiles when she says that.



Later, after my lessons and MRI—which showed nothing new—I am sitting in the menagerie, brushing Alai, when the alarms go off. Alai is a two-hundred-pound jaguar that Uncle Paolo gave me for my ninth birthday, when Alai was just a cub. He hates everyone in Little Cam except me, Uncle Antonio, and the cook, Jacques, who brings Alai cookies every morning. Alai is mad about cookies.

The alarms blare in two short bursts. Behind me, the monkeys start screaming in response. They like to think they run the menagerie, but I won't have any of it.

“Oh, shut up, you dummies,” I say, rising from the ground and turning to shake Alai's brush at them. The Grouch, a huge orange howler monkey, stares straight at me and lets out an obnoxious roar. The howlers used to scare me when I was little, but now I just roll my eyes at them.

“Come on, Alai!” I say, heading for the door. The menagerie is a long, low cement building with dirt floors and wide picture windows in every cage. Most of the animals are there for experimentation—which means we have several immortal residents—but Alai is not allowed to be used for any tests. He is completely mine.

After pulling the heavy metal door shut behind me, I start running. Alai lopes at my heels, his huge paws all but silent on the path. I have to circle most of Little Cam before I finally reach the gate. My heart is racing, not because of the run, but from excitement. Two alarms means the supply truck is here.

We only get a delivery every few months, so it's always a special occasion when one arrives. Uncle Timothy, a huge, muscular man with skin as dark as obsidian, is in charge of

making the trek through the jungle to the Little Mississip, the nearest river to Little Cam. I don't know what comes after the Little Mississip, but it must be a long journey since every supply run takes him nearly two months. Once I asked Uncle Paolo to show me a map of Uncle Timothy's route, but he told me to never ask him or anyone else that question again.

The gate is the only entrance or exit from our compound, and now it is swinging open on mechanical tracks to admit the trucks. There are three of them, huge, growling, angry things with canvas tops and wheels drenched with mud. Belching and rattling, they pull into the wide dirt drive in front of the dining hall and shudder to a stop. Uncle Timothy jumps out of the lead truck, his bald head glistening with sweat. He has a handkerchief tied around his mouth and nose, and as I come running up, he pulls it down and smiles. He has the whitest teeth of anyone I know.

"Hey, little miss! Come give your Uncle T a hug, yeah?" He spreads his arms, but I wrinkle my nose and dodge aside. He smells like the Grouch.

"You're disgusting! What did you bring? Where did you go?" I race around to the back of his truck and climb onto the high bumper so I can peer inside. "Did you trade with some natives?" Ever since I first heard of the jungle dwellers whom Uncle Timothy calls the "natives," I've been fascinated by the possibility of seeing one. I've not had the chance yet, since he usually goes to their villages whenever he needs to trade for fresh fruit. Often the scientists go with him to ask the natives how they use certain plants for medicine.

"Get down from there, Pia!" calls my mother. She and a crowd of people are gathering around the trucks, and everyone

looks excited, since delivery days are our only contact with the outside world.

I eye the boxes and crates eagerly, wondering what they hold. I start to reach for something with the word *Skittles* across it, with a picture of a rainbow and what look like pieces of candy, when suddenly someone pops up from behind the crate. Startled, I jump backward and land on the ground beside Alai.

It's a woman. She's squinting and yawning as if she just woke up, and her rumpled clothes suggest that she just did.

"Oh, hi," she says with a sleepy smile. "Is this Little Cam, then?" Her accent is clipped in a way I've never heard before. Her hair is as shockingly orange as a howler monkey's, and it frizzes out in every direction.

"This is Little Cam," I reply warily. "Who are you?"

"Dr. Fields!" says a voice, and I turn to see Uncle Paolo striding toward us. "Welcome! So good to meet you!" He helps her down. She's very tall and thin, and her white shirt is stained with brown spots.

She must have seen me staring, because she laughs and pulls at her shirt. "Coffee," she explains. "I must have drunk a gallon of it in Manaus and another pint on the Little Mississip. What a name for a river! Who's the Yank responsible for that one?"

Suddenly everyone grows silent.

"Where's Manaus?" I ask.

She stares at me with a funny smile. "What do you mean, 'Where's Manaus?' You *have* to go through Manaus if you want to get anywhere in this jungle—"

"Dr. Fields," interrupts Uncle Paolo. "I'm sure you must

be exhausted. Come inside, we'll get you something to eat and show you to your room."

"Sounds brilliant. Whoop! Wait just a tick—" She clambers onto the truck and bends over the tailgate, rooting around for something inside. I notice Uncle Paolo, Uncle Antonio, and a few other uncles observing how her rear bobs up and down while she searches. I scowl, not too sure about this *Dr. Fields* woman. No one told *me* she was coming.

"Ah! Got it!" She holds up a large metal canteen as if it were a cure for cancer she'd just discovered. "My coffee!"

"Excellent, excellent," says Uncle Paolo. He offers her a hand down, but she ignores it and jumps clumsily, nearly breaking her ankle when she lands.

"Whoop!" she hollers. "I'm such a klutz! Ha! Oh, great Scott, a jaguar! Hello, beautiful!" She bends down and makes a kissy noise at Alai. I wait for him to growl and snap like he does with everyone else, but instead he pads right up to her and starts purring as she scratches his ears. Finally she declares she's ready for dinner and some hot coffee, and, chattering all the way, she leads a cluster of men into the dining hall. Each of them is shoving the others to extend a handshake and their names. They disappear inside, leaving the crowd around the trucks much smaller in number. Alai rubs against my leg, still purring.

"Traitor," I hiss. With a yawn, he flops onto the ground and starts licking his paws.

"What a dope," I say to Uncle Antonio. "Who invited her, anyway?"

"What's your problem, Chipmunk? She seems nice." He

stares at the dining hall wistfully, and I sigh. At least he hadn't joined the welcoming committee.

As if in direct response to my relief, he adds, "I better see if she needs help with her luggage." And off he goes.

"What about the supplies?" I yell. "Who's gonna unload those? Me?" I point at the trucks, but he ignores me. Uncle Timothy comes over and slaps me on the shoulder, laughing.

"Looks like our new ginger's got plenty of help, eh, Pia? She's a nutter, that one, and she talks enough to make a sloth want to run the other way."

"Who is she?"

"Dr. Harriet Fields, a biomedical engineer. Come to replace Smithers, I think."

"Uncle Smithy's leaving?" The ancient, white-haired scientist has been in Little Cam longer than anyone else. Some say he was here when the Accident happened, thirty years ago. Besides being a biomedical engineer, he's a painter, and he always keeps a brush close at hand.

"It's what I heard." Uncle Timothy shrugs. "So, did I hear you volunteering to unload everything? Sounds great, I'm bushed."

I don't rise to the bait. I'm too disturbed by this new biomedical engineer. It's been years since someone new has come to Little Cam. The last new arrival was Clarence, the janitor, when I was eight.

Deciding that I am tired of talking about Dr. Harriet Fields, or, as I'm already calling her in my head, *Dr. Klutz*, I ask Uncle Timothy if he's brought my dress.

"Dress? What dress?"

I slap his massive arm. It's as solid as steel, but he makes a show of pouting and rubbing the spot. "Oh, *that* dress."

I have to wait until a crew unloads the trucks, hauls everything to a warehouse, and starts opening boxes before we find it. It's teal blue, and the bodice is studded with tiny crystals. "Oh," I breathe when I see it. Mother comes over and takes it. She holds it up to me, her face uncharacteristically cheerful.

"Lovely," she says. "Chiffon and silk . . . and it even matches your eyes. I'm surprised at you, Timothy! I thought surely with *you* doing the shopping, you'd come back with a jaguar-print toga or something hideous like that."

"Mother!" I gasp, and I reach down to cover Alai's ears. "You've offended him."

"I didn't pick it," Uncle Timothy protests. "I had that Fields woman find it. Send a man like me to shop for a party dress . . . *pah!*"

"Go try it on," Mother urges.

"No, it's for my party. I won't wear it until my birthday." Two more weeks. I can barely stand the wait. Ever since I found out about parties, I begged for months for a real one. Finally everyone agreed, though most of them were grudging about it. Tuxedos are scarce in the middle of the rainforest. Luckily Uncle Timothy already had a supply run planned, so one of the boxes scattered around the warehouse has to be stuffed with party clothes. Uncle Paolo still grumbles at me about the cost and the inconvenience of it all, but only half-heartedly, or he'd never have agreed to it in the first place.

"Here," says Uncle Timothy, handing me a little package. It's the one called Skittles, and he's already ripped it open and started munching on a handful. "Try those."

I expect chocolate, since they look like M&Ms (which Uncle Timothy brought me last time), but instead I taste a burst of fruit. “They’re good!” I dump half the bag into my mouth and decide I want Skittles instead of birthday cake at the party. Mother wanders off to help inventory a box of syringes and other medical supplies, and I trail after Uncle Timothy as he oversees the unpacking.

“Uncle T,” I say, trying to be as nonchalant as possible, “what’s Manaus like?”

His back is turned to me, and I see the muscles in his shoulders tense. As he turns around, I put on my most determined face. “Well? Is it true you have to go through Manaus if you want to get anywhere?”

He looks around, but no one heard my question. He leans over and puts his dark face inches from mine. “Now don’t you be asking me questions like that, Pia. You know it’s against the rules. Do you want to get me in trouble?”

I frown, and beside me Alai raises his hackles slightly. “I won’t tell anyone you told me. Come *on*, Uncle T! I know all about protozoons and mitochondria, and I can tell you the genus and species of all the animals in the menagerie, but all I really want to know about is my own jungle!”

“No, Pia.” He turns away and pretends to be busy moving some boxes around.

I watch for a while, but not even the prospect of more of those Skittles interests me now. Delivery day is ruined. I leave the warehouse with Alai at my side, angry at Uncle T, angry at Mother, angry at Uncle Antonio, and angry at that Dr. Klutz for ever mentioning Manaus.

The rules. The stupid rules that have been in place for over

JESSICA KHOURY

thirty years. A list of them hangs in the lounge, in huge print, so that no one can forget. No books, magazines, or movies from the outside, unless they're science textbooks, and even those get edited by Uncle Paolo. I have biology books full of blacked-out paragraphs and defaced photos. All music played must be instrumental only, no lyrics. No one can talk about the outside world, at least not when I'm around. No maps. No radios. No photographs. Anything deemed by Uncle Paolo, as the director of Little Cam, to be a "corruptive influence" is seized and locked up somewhere, probably in Uncle Timothy's room, until its owner retires. And that's if the item isn't destroyed altogether.

I know why the rules exist.

Two words: the Accident.

THREE

Uncle Antonio tries to run on the treadmill and read from his quiz sheet at the same time. Not a good idea, but I don't say anything. We're in the gym, doing a microbiology lesson. There's no one else in the room, which is unusual in the early afternoon, but I know where everyone is: helping that Harriet Fields settle in. She was all anyone talked about at dinner last night, and her table was crowded with scientists vying to awe her with their intellects. I sat in a corner with Mother, the pair of us watching with dark looks over our tuna salad. I don't think Mother's any fonder of Dr. Klutz than I am.

Uncle Antonio's voice is husky from running. "Typhus fever is contracted by *Rick*—"

"*Rickettsia prowazekii*," I finish.

Uncle Antonio hits the stop button on his treadmill and jogs to a halt. He's panting heavily, and there are more sweat stains than dry spots on his blue tee. After he catches his

breath, he says, “That wasn’t the question, Chipmunk. I was *going* to ask, what animal carries—”

“Lice. *Pediculus humanus*.” I crank the speed of my own treadmill up a notch, my stride lengthening to match the whirl of the belt.

“Hey, who’s doing the teaching here?” Uncle Antonio comes around to the front of my treadmill and throws his arm over the safety rail. His other hand grips his water bottle as if it is the only thing keeping him alive. He looks at the digital display on the machine and shakes his head. “You’re something else, kid.”

“Why is everyone so worked up over that new woman?” I ask, my tone more than a bit terse. “What’s so special about her?”

His eyebrows lift quizzically. “Why, Chipmunk, are you *jealous*?”

“No!”

The amusement in his eyes makes me more irritated. “I think you are. You’re jealous of the attention she’s getting.”

“I am not,” I reply. “It’s not like I want everyone hanging all over me all day.”

“No?” He sits on the weight-lifting bench that no one ever uses. “Because it seems to me that’s the normal order of business.”

I glare, but he only laughs.

“She’s new and different, Pia. That’s all it is. Couple of months and she’ll be one of us, just another regular face. But you’ll always be you, immortal and special. So don’t worry. No one’s taking your place.”

“I don’t see why we need her, anyway. Soon I’ll be part

of the Immortis team, and then we'll make more immortals. What do we need Harriet Fields for?"

The smile leaves his face, replaced by a strange, shadowed look. "I don't know."

"Do you think they'll stop bringing in new scientists once I'm in charge?"

"I don't know." Still that grim look in his eyes. Maybe I'm pushing the Dr. Klutz thing a little too far.

"You're wrong," I say. "I'm not jealous of the attention she's getting. But do you think . . . do you think she's here because Uncle Paolo doesn't believe I'm ready? Does he think we need someone as backup, in case I don't pass the next Wickham test?"

Uncle Antonio stares at me. "No," he says softly, but I wonder if he said it just because it's what I want to hear.

"So, where do you think she's from?" I ask, trying to lighten the conversation.

"Dr. Fields?" He shrugs. "Doesn't matter."

"Oh, come on, Uncle Antonio." I stop the treadmill to retie my ponytail, which came loose while I ran. "You're just as interested in her as everyone else. I saw you last night, hovering at her elbow all through dinner."

"I was not *hovering*."

"You were so."

A smile plays on his lips. "Well. Maybe a little."

"It's strange, isn't it? These new scientists who come here, they have whole other lives outside Little Cam. Do you ever think about it? About where they must come from? Who they were before they came to the jungle?"

He gives me a guarded look. "Why? Do you?"

“It’s a natural question. And I’m a scientist. It’s my *job* to ask questions. Uncle Antonio.” I sit beside him and chew my lip a moment, then ask in a hush, “Do you ever . . . you know . . . wonder what it would be like? Out there?”

Uncle Antonio stares at his hands. “Out where?”

“You know what I mean. Outside . . . the fence.”

When he finally meets my eyes, his lips are a thin, taut line. “No. I don’t.”

Without another word, he stands up and leaves.

I stare at the door as it swings shut. I don’t believe him.

Not for a minute.

When I go to my laboratory for my weekly checkup that afternoon, I pass Harriet Fields in the hall. She says hi and gives a little waist-level wave, and I give her a little jerk of my chin in response. I feel her eyes on my back as I pass her.

I call it *my* laboratory because it’s the one entirely devoted to me. It’s like a second bedroom, and I’m quite proud of it. I keep a row of potted orchids along the window sills, and there are pictures of me all over the walls. They’re kind of boring, having been made to chart things like the development of my facial bones, but still.

Uncle Paolo is waiting for me as usual. He sits by my metal examination table, thumbing through a stack of past checkup reports.

“Morning,” I say to him, and I pause by a glass cage in the corner. The fat, sleepy rat inside wiggles his nose at me. “Morning, Roosevelt.”

Uncle Paolo smiles. “Morning, Pia,” he says as I take

my place on the exam table. “Find anything good in the delivery?”

“Skittles.” I swing my legs back and forth under the table and watch him make some notes on a clipboard.

“Ah, yes.” He pulls out a stethoscope and takes my heart-beat. “I haven’t had Skittles in years. I’ll have to get some.”

“Too late. I got dibs already. They’re for the party.”

“The party,” he repeats. “Still planning for your fairy-tale ball, eh? Open.”

I open my mouth, and he swabs the inside of my cheek with a cotton wad. “It’s not a fairy-tale ball. It’s a real party, like the ones they have in cities.”

“And what would you know of cities?”

“I read about them in the dictionary. ‘An urban area where a large number of people live and work,’” I quote.

He only grunts as he deposits the saliva sample on a microscope slide.

Then, just to see what his reaction will be, I add, “I know that Manaus is a city.”

Uncle Paolo drops the cotton swab. “*Damn*. Open again, I’ll have to get another.”

I wonder if that *damn* was for the lost saliva sample or my lucky guess. “So it *is* a city!”

“Pia.” He sets the second sample on a small metal tray and starts pulling off his squeaky latex gloves. “Never bring up Manaus again.”

“Why?”

His hands pause with one glove half off, and he draws in a sharp breath before continuing. “I have told you many times,

Pia. It's dangerous out there. Those people wouldn't understand you. You would frighten them with what you have, and they would soon grow jealous. You cannot die, but that does not mean they can't hurt you."

"Those people," I repeat softly.

"Yes. The ones out *there*. They don't see things as we do here, Pia. They would put you in a box and never let you out, don't you see?"

I nod my head, thinking of the sparrow and the electrified cage, imagining myself in the place of the bird. I shiver.

"Do not bring up Manaus again." He speaks in the tone he usually reserves for testing days, but then his face softens. He covers my hand with his own. "You're safe here. For now, this is where you belong. One day, Pia, you'll see the world. Don't doubt that. But until the world is ready to see *you*, I'm afraid Little Cam will have to suffice."

"All right," I respond meekly.

He smiles and squeezes my hand. "I was here the day you were born, you know. I was the first one to hold you. I was the one who chose your name."

"You were?" He's never mentioned it before.

"Yes. *Pia*, because it means reverent, and that's exactly what I felt when I saw you."

His eyes, locked on mine, are warm and earnest, and I find myself smiling.

The rest of the examination goes as usual. It doesn't take long. I'm so used to the exam that I could do it myself. Heartbeat, saliva sample, eyes, ears, and nose, check, check, check, and we're done. Uncle Paolo gave up on taking blood samples years ago. No matter what material the needles are

made of, and no matter how hard he presses, nothing punctures my skin.

“All done, Pia. Go and work on planning your party or something.”

“I need to water my orchids.”

He nods and does a few more little tasks around the lab before he leaves.

I am watering the first flower when I hear footsteps and turn to see what Uncle Paolo forgot. But it isn't him. It's Dr. Klutz.

“What do *you* want?” I ask.

She raises her eyebrows in surprise. They are as red as her hair. “Relax, why don't you? I just want to chat. We didn't get to properly meet one another yesterday.”

Great. I turn back to my orchids. “Hi. Nice to meet you.”

“Nice to meet you too,” she returns in an equally blank tone. “Good heavens, girl, at least give me a chance before you decide to make an enemy of me. Here, let me help.”

She tries to take the watering can from me and ends up knocking it over and pouring water all over my shoes.

“Oops!” she says, and as I stare openmouthed at the mess, she finds a towel and hands it to me. I sop up the water, biting my tongue to keep from snapping something I'll later regret. Dr. Klutz perches herself on the examination table and looks around.

“Terrible pictures,” she says as she studies my portraits on the wall.

I normally wouldn't throw it in someone's face like this, but I can't help it. The woman rubs me the wrong way. “They're *perfect*.”

“That’s right,” she says thoughtfully, eyeing me. “I hadn’t even had a chance to wash the dust from the road off my face when your Doctor Paolo Alvez had me cornered. I got the whole Pia talk, oh, yes.”

“The Pia talk?” My curiosity bests my stubbornness for a moment, and I step closer. “What’s that?”

“You mean you didn’t get it too?” She draws a pack of cigarettes from her pocket and lights one. I hate cigarettes. They are the only thing in the world that make me ill, though Mother tells me that I just don’t like the smell and that I’m not really ill at all. “Yes, I was properly backed into a corner, with Alvez breathing down my blouse about secrecy and signing contracts and consequences and all sorts of spookiness. And at the center of it all”—she inhales deeply and blows a stream of disgusting smoke toward me—“was you.”

“Well,” I reply stiffly, “I *am* the reason this place exists.”

“I must confess, I had no idea what I was getting into when I took this job. Thought I was coming down just to study the cell structures of mosquitoes, maybe clone a few rats. They told me this was a research center that targeted the ‘big ones’—cancer, heart disease”—her face goes suddenly still, as if she’s looking at something far off—“cerebral palsy. Though I did think it odd I had to sign on for a minimum of thirty years, but . . .” Her cigarette seems forgotten between her index and middle fingers. Its thin tail of smoke curls across her face. “Well, let’s just say the deal this place offered was very convincing.”

Her eyes refocus, finding me and then narrowing suspiciously. “And *then* there was all the cloak-and-dagger stuff on the way here. That giant moose of a man, Timothy, wouldn’t tell me *anything*. And what do you think but the first thing he

asks me is if I can go buy a dress for a seventeen-year-old girl?" She shakes her head, and I notice for the first time that her wild red frizz is tamed into a braid over her shoulder. With the hair under control, she's quite pretty, and younger than I'd first thought.

"The dress was all right." I shrug. No need to tell her I love it. I don't want her thinking we're friends or something.

"It's weird, having a black-tie party in the middle of the wilderness."

"You just say whatever pops into your head, don't you?"

"Always. Without question. That's the only way I know I'm being truly original."

"Why did you come to Little Cam?"

"Didn't you hear? To study tapirs and three-toed sloths."

"What did Uncle Paolo say about me?"

"That you're *immortal*." I can tell from the twitch of her lips around her cigarette that she doesn't believe it.

"I am."

"Huh. He also said you were perfect."

"I'm that too."

"Psh. Sure, honey."

"I *am*!" I'm bristling like Alai now. "Watch."

I pick up a scalpel from Uncle Paolo's tray of tools. Dr. Klutz's eyes widen. "Pia . . ."

"Just watch." I run it down my arm, pressing as hard as I can. It stings, but only mildly. I *can* feel pain, but not as intensely as other people. A faint white line is the only evidence of the blade's touch, but it disappears in seconds.

Dr. Klutz gapes, her eyes wide, cigarette forgotten between her fingers. "My sweet, giddy aunt . . ."

That seems like an odd thing for someone to say, but I feel strangely pleased with her response. Setting the scalpel down, I reach into a drawer, pull out a rolled-up chart, and spread it on the exam table beside her. She watches my every move with rapt attention.

“What’s that?”

“This,” I announce with no small amount of pride, “is my family tree. Did Uncle Paolo tell you the story behind Little Cam, me, all of this?”

“He said we’d cover that in orientation tonight, but”—she leans forward and whispers—“I’m rather an impatient woman. So go on. Tell me.”

“Well,” I begin, thrilled to have an audience. I’ve never had the chance to tell someone my story before, not like this. “It all began one hundred years ago, in 1902. A team of scientists were going through the jungle in search of new plants to use for medicines. They went deeper than anyone else from the outside had gone before and met natives who had never seen people with white skin and mustaches. They were led by a biologist and botanist named Heinrich Falk, who heard of a plant in the very heart of the jungle that could extend human life. Everyone else thought it was a myth. Stories like these were more numerous than the leaves of a kapok tree, and none of them had ever been proved. But Dr. Falk found it. *Epidendrum elysius*. Elysia, he called it. In all of the rainforest—and in all of the world—it’s found in only one place. Falk’s Glen. It’s not far from here, I’m told, though I’ve never been there myself.”

“So what did this magical flower do, then, eh?” she asks.

I can hear the skepticism creeping back. That's fine. I'm not done with my story yet.

"It's not magic. It's science. And it kills you within minutes if you eat it or drink the nectar that pools in the cup of its petals." I have never seen Falk's Glen, but I have seen elysia. Uncle Antonio brought me a stem once, a single stem of the precious plant that is the basis of my existence. It is a deep purple, and the tips of its petals are tinged with gold. It doesn't look much different from some of my orchids in the window. I tried to replant it, but it died. I wasn't the first to try it. One of the Little Cam scientists' greatest hopes is to figure out how to replant elysia. So far, no luck at all. It wouldn't be such an issue if we knew how it reproduced, but that's another mystery. The same flowers that grow in Falk's Glen now are the exact same blossoms Falk and his team discovered. The life cycle of elysia has never been discerned; for all we know, it *doesn't* reproduce."

Dr. Klutz snorts and remembers her cigarette. Before she inhales again, however, she says, "Sounds like some bully magic. So that's what happened to Falk, then? Shows up bold as brass, names the flower, names the place after himself, and then promptly eats the bloody thing and drops dead?"

"No, that's not how it happened at all. They set up camp and began experimenting on rats, that's what they did. The camp moved here and there and finally *here*, where we are now, and then it became permanent. I think it was Dr. Falk's successor, Wickham, who finally named it Little Cambridge." And who developed the Wickham test, designed to evaluate new scientists before bringing them into the project. I wonder what Dr. Klutz's Wickham test was.

“So what’s the chart about?”

“I’m getting to that. Will you be patient?” I brush my hair behind my ears and draw a deep breath. “So, they experimented on rats. They figured out how to add the nectar of another flower to elysia to counteract its lethality and make it safe to inject into rats and humans alike. I’ve never seen the other flower, but Uncle Paolo tells me it’s just called the catalyst. It must be rare because I can’t find it in any encyclopedia or database anywhere. Anyway, they started injecting the rats, but nothing happened. They lived their normal little rat lives and died when they got old. End of story.”

“Is it?”

“Is it what?”

“Is that the end of the story?”

“Of course not!” The woman may be a biomedical engineer, but I begin to think she might also be a certifiable idiot. “Because something happened that no one expected. The scientists had been injecting the rats’ offspring and the offspring’s offspring with Immortis—the nonlethal form of elysia made with the catalyst—never quite believing that anything would come of it. The rats lived, the rats died, and they never showed a sign of anything abnormal. Until . . .” I cross the room, lift the lid of a cage, and pick up the rat inside it. “Until Roosevelt.”

I hold him up to Dr. Klutz, hoping that—doctor of biomedicine or not—she might scream and cringe. Instead, she plucks Roosevelt from my hands and coos over him as if he were a kitten. A little surprised, but oddly pleased that she seems so taken with him, I continue, “Roosevelt was born in 1904.”

She nearly drops him, and he squeals indignantly. “You’re lying!”

“I certainly am not. Roosevelt is over a hundred years old. Most rats don’t live more than two or three.”

Dr. Klutz stares at Roosevelt, then stares at me. “What happened then?”

Ah. I have her attention again, and this time I know she’s hooked for good. “Well, Roosevelt here revealed a few more surprises. He was the only rat to be born in his litter, which is unusual in itself. When Dr. Falk went to inject him with Immortis, the needle of the syringe snapped. So did the other dozen or so he tried to use. Yes, Roosevelt’s skin is as thick as mine. That is to say, it is completely impenetrable. And what is more, Roosevelt is faster and more agile than any other rat. Uh-huh,” I nod when she looks at me questioningly. “Me too. And most important of all, three, four, twenty years pass, and Roosevelt goes on living as happily and healthily as you could wish for. So of course Dr. Falk runs dozens of experiments on hundreds of rats and discovers the secret.”

I pause, relishing the way Dr. Klutz is hanging on my every word. Finally, I say it. “It comes down to the gradual alteration of the human—or rat—genome. It takes five generations, no more and no less, of periodic injections of Immortis for the immortality gene in the flower to assimilate into the genetic code of the rat or the human. Dr. Falk returned to the outside and found thirty-two of the most healthy, athletic, brilliant, and beautiful young people society had to offer. He brought them back to Little Cam, which is when this place really started to boom, and began injecting them. They had

JESSICA KHOURY

children, their children had children, *their* children had children, and those children had me.”

I take Roosevelt back and stroke his soft fur, feeling the pattering of his heart in my palm. “And precisely as everyone had hoped during those hundred years of research, experimentation, and selective breeding . . . I am immortal.”