

GIFTED

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H. A. SWAIN

A FEIWEL AND FRIENDS BOOK  
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*For my darling, Clementine*

“... no hypocrisy is too great when economic and financial elites are obliged to defend their interest.”

—CAPITAL IN THE TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY, Thomas Piketty, 2014

# CHORUS

A dragonfly, perhaps one of the last, darts downriver, searching for another of its kind. Where have the others gone? Has anyone but this dragonfly noticed the species decline or have mechanical drones, the same size and shape with cameras for eyes, obscured their slow disappearance? Bigger drones, the size of birds, lift up from the roofs of warehouses built along the meandering river and fly a predetermined path from the Corp X Complex to the City where they deposit their packages in delivery chutes like babies from storybook storks.

Down on the ground, on the path by the river, people slip by, gravel crunching under feet, voices low. None of them will notice the dragonfly, though. The sound vibrations from its iridescent green wings are lost among the willow branches and low hum of delivery drones in the sky. Only a frozard hears it. Readies itself for the hunt. Head moving side to side, zeroing in on its prey. The dragonfly drafts higher on a breeze that sends ripples like fish scales across the water down below.

All around the dragonfly, electromagnetic waves oscillate

at the speed of light. With a transmitter and antenna anyone could ride these waves, although nowadays everything legit streams in zeros and ones across the digital divide. Analog broadcasts are all but dead as true radio began to fizzle a long time ago when FM and AM stations blinked out like dying stars. But there are holdouts. Old-school rabble-rousers. Like DJ HiJax, who snatches nighttime waves to play old songs, long forgotten, and reminisces in altered voices about the days when music belonged to the people.

Tonight, though, no such luck. HiJax is on the run, setting up another pirate radio station in yet another undisclosed location. And so, only the breeze disrupts the dragonfly's sound. Sound waves bend. The frozard misjudges, shooting out its tongue into nothingness. The dragonfly continues along the bend in the river, skirting around and over the people who search for a partially hidden path in the dim light of the moon.

Corp X workers come in twos and threes from the POD-Plexes and warehouses built along the river a half decade ago. They are quiet. No conversation yet through black masks on these class-war criminals. What goes on out here, a mere half mile from the Complex, is risky and must stay hidden. Quietly, they slip over a crest of matted grass and down a steep embankment, like squimonks scurrying into hidey-holes, hoping to be safe and undetected for the night. They find the door (built into the side of the earth with a "Welcome to Nowhere" sign) that leads into a dank room carved out from this riverbank.

Inside, anticipation crackles like heat lightning on a humid night. There's a wooden box at the end of the bar (two boards across old sawhorses). In the back, there's a makeshift stage

(wooden pallets dragged from the dump) behind a large swath of discarded canvas with a faded, defunct logo—a swish turned upside down so it looks like a cresting wave. Everyone here knows what to do: drop cash into the box (no COYN accepted), pick up a cup of local Juse (distilled from wild potatoes and dandelion greens gathered by the river), and wait. When the curtain flicks, the crowd inhales and shifts, vying to get a better look, but it's not time yet so the canvas stays closed.

“How's it look out there?” Zimri asks.

“Full, I think,” says Dorian.

Zimri's stomach tightens. She pats her pocket for the digital audio recorder and straightens the cord running to a tiny mic on her lapel. She'll capture the whole show and release it later on the waves. Then she palms a little sphere with a non-blinking eye that she uncovered in the mess of old and outdated gear her mother left behind when she took off five years ago.

“What's that?” Dorian asks.

“Might be a video camera,” she says. “It connects to this.” She points to an ancient laptop where she has preloaded all the backing tracks for tonight's show. She plays every instrument—the crappy old electric guitar and bass her mother left, a synthesizer with missing keys, and a ZimriDoo she made herself from scavenged PVC pipes and oil pans, funnels and air tubes, strings and stoppers—part drum, part fiddle, part accordion—a one-person band strapped over her shoulders. “Thought it might be fun to see what we look like up there.”

“Just as long as you don't broadcast live,” Dorian says with a nervous chuckle.

“Nah,” says Zim. “Wouldn't know how if I tried.”





Outside, a mere quarter-mile away, Nonda searches for Zimri. She knows the place is around here somewhere. Near the elbow in the river where the watercress is thick and raspberries sometimes still grow in summer. But the walk takes longer than she remembers. Her legs are tired and slow. Not like when she was young. She listens carefully for the music but her hearing has grown dim. Too many years in the warehouse, metal on metal on metal bouncing around the vast space under one roof where the whole town used to be. Cacophony, that's the word. Sounds like what it means.

Still, she hears music in her head. Symphonies and jazz. The old stuff. Way before her time, and she's seventy-five. She passed her love of old music down to Rainey, who liked to listen from the start. A tiny baby soothed by Haydn sonatas, Coltrane riffs, and Sarah Vaughn lullabies. Nonda filled her head with the stuff. Maybe that was the problem. Why Rainey couldn't stop. And now Nonda suspects Zimri is making music, too. Girl has it in her just like her mother, despite Nonda's best efforts to keep it tamped down. Shushed her when she hummed. Took her spoon away when she banged it in rhythm. Smacked her mouth when she matched notes on the tram. The dominant seventh chord of the horn. The dissonance of the squeaking brakes. The girl has it bad. Music is inside her and Nonda always knew it would eventually find a way out.

She'd recognize that girl's voice anywhere. It's pure and sweet like Rainey's was—a two-octave range with a little smoke around the edges. Nonda might be old, but she's not dumb. She

built herself a receiver years before Tati started selling them in her Old Town shop, though she never expected to hear Zimri coming through it. Child's just like her mother, which is why Nonda must keep searching along the riverbank with her ears perked up like a frozard listening for a dragonfly to pass by.



For every Plebe worker out at Nowhere, there are twenty up on the Strip because what else is there to do after a twelve-hour warehouse shift? Personal Occupancy Domiciles are small, each POD only two hundred square feet with retractible furniture and one screen per family unit. But at the Strip, warehouse workers zap COYN from their HandHelds and step inside what used to be a grocery store, a bookshop, a bank, and a restaurant way back when Nonda was a kid. Individual shops have gone the way of critters that used to inhabit the riverbank. Who needs them all when you can squish them up together? A single super space for all your entertainment needs! Here the bar is large, expansive, taking up an entire wall. No cash, no masks needed. It's on the up and up. With frothy Near Beers and steaming bowls of grubworm-meal noodles in hand, Plebes flock to the three-story-tall, one-block-wide screen showing perfectly legal digital entertainment.

So far the Buzz on screen is filled with images of the richest and most beautiful Plutes posing for endless pix at tony events in the City Distract. Gallery openings. Movie premieres. Hottest ticket restaurant seatings. What more could Plebe

viewers want? Those who've made it on the Buzz must be worth watching, right? Otherwise, you're a has-been or never-was and not worth anybody's time. Like Libellule, the last self-made superstar of pop, curled up beneath her duvet in a PONI apartment on the outskirts of the City, dreaming of the days when she ruled the waves.

Then the scene on the screen switches. There's a LiveStream tonight from Chanson Industries Arena. Cameras focus in on the crowd mingling at the Arena while waiting for celeb singer Geoff Joffrey to take the stage. He waits behind a curtain of finest blue silk. Melodies buzz like gnats inside his brain, so many he can't capture them all. Sometimes his head aches with so much music. He's a lucky one, though. Kept himself relevant for years. The Chanson PromoTeam gets half the credit. They've updated his look every three months, leaked preplotted stories of romantic ties to up-and-coming talent, pulled favors and made enemies to keep him in the Buzz. But he's getting tired. Wearing down. He's already twenty-two years old—five years past his Acquired Savant Ability surgery that rewired his brain for musical genius. No doubt, the ASA has paid off and set him up for life, but sometimes he dreams that he is running from a swarm of locusts, each one singing its own melody so the sound becomes overwhelming. He watches himself trip and fall and curl into a ball, knees to elbows, head covered in a feeble attempt to protect himself from ten thousand tiny sharp jaws.

"It's time," his handler tells him. He nods and moves moth-like toward the lights as the curtain swishes open. Plutes in the Arena get to their feet while Plebes at the Strip sway and lift their cups when Geoff Joffrey takes the stage.



On the riverbank, Nonda slips and falls against a tree, exhausted and confused about why she's out here—was she picking greens for Rainey? A dragonfly momentarily alights on her arm. She says hello and blows on it. It lifts up to join the breeze that carries the faint vibrations of drums that Nonda feels beneath her sternum but can no longer hear.

The dragonfly follows those vibrations out past Nowhere, where inside a masked drummer has jogged on stage, smacking his sticks overhead. Hearts surge as he crashes a beat on a rickety kit (bass drum, hi-hat, snare). The hypnotic rhythm hits the masked Plebes in their chests and deep down in their guts and they begin to move like the beat has overtaken them. They stomp their feet, yell, whistle through their teeth, and lift their arms overhead, clapping hands together in unison. Fish mouths in the river begging to be fed. Zimri takes one last look from behind the curtain, then she shouts, “Now!” and hits record on her devices.

Electromagnetic waves carrying ones and zeros crash together, like drones and dragonflies colliding. (It's the waves that killed the dragonflies. Disrupted their chemical signals. Messed with the frogs and lizards, too. Squirrels and chipmunks. Coyotes and wolves. Pushed and pressed together, competing for shrinking space. Unnatural unions are now the norm.)

From out here—puny Nowhere on no map—Zimri Robinson will not be denied her place, though. Without music her world is askew. She has to tilt herself to fit in. Melody and rhythm set things straight. When she's on stage, she's no longer that weird girl singing to herself. An oddball chirping to the

birds and humming with the trees. The one with an uncanny talent for navigating warehouse shelves to the rhythm of a countdown nobody else can hear. When Zimri steps through the curtain at Nowhere, she is her one true self. She is the music and music is meant to be shared—with the people who've assumed the risk of coming to Nowhere tonight and later those who scan the waves on black market receivers for what Zimri will release like a dandelion spreading its seeds.

Just as Geoff Joffrey starts “Your Eyes,” his newest song (and biggest hit yet, the PromoTeam has assured Mr. Chanson), the giant screen at the Strip flickers, then Geoff Joffrey disappears. The Plebes stop, stare, and wonder what's happening, when in his place a black-masked face fills the screen and a different crowd roars.

Back at Nowhere, Zimri leans into her camera and shouts, “We are Nobody from Nowhere and this is our song!”

# VERSE ONE

## ORPHEUS

When the pointed toe of Arabella's silver shoe trips the laser sensor, the MajorDoormo kicks into action. Sliders part, spotlights illuminate, and the scanner identifies us before we've fully stepped over the threshold of the Nahmad Gallery.

"Orpheus Chanson and Arabella Lovecraft," the automated voice announces, then sends the headline straight onto the Buzz. I know exactly what it will say since all my life I've been defined by the success of my parents.

Orpheus Chanson, son of pop diva legend Libellule and ASA patent-holder Harold Chanson—one of the most powerful music patrons in the world—arrives at the Quinby Masterson premiere with stunning starlet-in-the-making, Arabella Lovecraft.

Heads turn and conversations lull. A cluster of dragonfly 'razzi drones swarm the entryway. Ara and I step into the

spotlight and stop on the mark (a small gold star embedded in the floor).

“Just like we learned in SCEWL,” I remind Ara through my smile.

She momentarily panics. “SCEWL?”

“Paparazzi Pix Posing 101, remember?” I say, trying to coax her synapses to fire.

She still looks blank so I take a half step back, keeping one shoulder behind her as I guide her with my hand on the small of her back. “Look right,” I whisper. “Then left, and smile. Chin up, eyes wide. Top lip down to hide the gumline. Shake your head slightly. Look humble. Now a little laugh. Always having fun.”

She follows my direction effortlessly as it all comes back to her. The Kardashian School for Cumulative Entertainment Wealth Living trained us well.

“You did good,” I tell her when the photo-op is done. She sighs and looks relieved as we waltz into the crowd.

Quinby’s opening is popping, just like Rajesh said. I lead Arabella through the throngs of people who’ve come to pay homage to our friend—the newly minted art-world It Girl of the moment, rocking the scene with her images of fractal decay. To me her paintings look like repeating patterns of dead trees and leaves, but for whatever reason Quinby’s work has hit the *sosh* like a major earthquake, which has driven the prices sky high. Her patron, Hermela Nahmed, couldn’t be more thrilled and it shows, given the money she must have pumped into this opening. For the past hour there’s been near-constant chatter on my EarBug about which Celebs are here and what we’re wearing, eating, drinking, and talking about.

"I've got to turn this thing off," I say and kill my EarBug. "I get immediate ADHD if I'm in a crowd while the Buzz is talking to me."

"Get some methylphen in your pump," Ara tells me, still preening for the few 'razzi buzzing around us. "That stuff will focus you right up." She pops a fist on her hip and smiles with her eyes for one persistent dragonfly drone.

"Is your pump back on already?"

"Not yet. Still too fragile up here." She taps the side of her head. "No benzos, no SSRI, no appetite suppressants, only a smidge of oxycodone to manage the headaches."

"God forbid your brain regulate itself," I joke.

"What am I, a three-year-old?" she says, then cringes. "Sorry, I forgot you're *au naturel*."

"That's what happens when your mother's a former addict," I say and nudge her to the left. The grit of her crushed iridescent body glitter grinds beneath my fingertips. Her dress, which is made of tiny shining scales, glints and changes colors as we pass beneath the lights.

We walk by a group of DespotRati. I recognize one of them, Ios, from summer camp. She nods and lifts her left hand so I can see the carapace of her ExoScreen glove, lavender to my deep purple—a good compatibility rating but nothing like my connection with Arabella, whose carapace still gleams deep dark purple like my own. I was worried the surgery might have changed our compatibility, but so far so good. I pretend not to recognize Ios and keep moving.

"Who was that?" Ara asks, nose wrinkled as she glances back. Ios's paint job, intricate swirls and curlicues, waves and striations in aquamarines, purples, and pinks, looks like some



complicated bruise over her arms, legs, back, and chest. Her shimmery silver dress dangles from a loop of metal around her neck and hugs the barely covered curves between shoulders and thighs.

“Daughter of the former EU prime minister. You know how they still love government over there.” Ara looks blank. “She has that new song.” I hum a few bars of “(Quark) Charmed, I’m Sure.” “Probably debuted while you were recovering. They’re trying to push it as a new genre, Quantum Pop, but I think it sounds like Sparkle Jam. They needed something more atmospheric to create a truly original sound.”

Ara laughs at me, which she often does when I talk about improving songs. How a key change would add depth to the bridge or adding strings for a harmonic overlay would bring out the emotion of a lyric. *Wasted energy*, people tell me. *A song is only as good as its Buzz*.

“Anyway,” I say. “I heard she had a double ASA, physics and music, but I think that’s just hype to sell her new line of gum. ‘Now in all the quark flavors!’” I say in a falsely perky voice just like the ad.

“How do you know her anyway?”

“We both did a summer camp in Malta when we were fourteen. She knew all my mom’s music and sang *Sugar Smack* to me.”

“Oh my god,” says Ara as we weave through a group of waning movie stars, all just past their prime, looking desperate for some Buzz. “She *sang* it to you?”

“And did the choreography.”

“Ew!” Ara squeals.

“I know, right? I was like, no thanks. What guy wants to

think of his mother as a sexy teen pop star?” A tiny quake of revulsion goes through me.

From across the room, Elston and Farouk wave at us like they’re flagging down a flying taxi. We make a beeline for them, whisking tangy drinks from a passing RoboWaiter along the way.

“First night out for Arabella!” I announce when we join our friends. We all lift our cups above our heads and laugh as if it’s *freaking hilarious* that another friend had her brain zapped and woke up with a Chanson Industry trademarked and patented Acquired Savant Ability thanks to my father. Just a little brain surgery and POOF you wake up a genius. The hilarious part being, Plute parents pay for their kids to have the surgeries, then people like my father make a fortune off their talents, and we call this Art.

My friends and I clink glasses and down our drinks, everyone lifting hands up high and clicking pix with their Exo-Screen FingerCams. The images are sent into the data swarm and culled by some complicated algorithm that sorts sound-bites, ’razzi drone vids, and FingerCam images into what’s Buzz-worthy for the night.

As soon as the group steps apart, they all check their palm screens, hoping that the moment we just experienced will get plucked from that deluge of data and fed into the Buzz for everyone else to see. Are you famous enough, are your parents, has your patron’s PromoTeam pushed for more coverage this week? Fleeting disappointment passes over my friends’ faces when our real-time moment doesn’t reappear in the Buzz. None of us are worthy enough. Yet.

Farouk turns his attention back to Arabella. “You look

gorgeous! Amazing! Isn't she beautiful?" Elston and I nod and nod and nod. "So, what'd you have?"

She blinks at him for two seconds, like she can't quite remember. It takes a while for everything to come back online after an ASA so we all wait patiently, trying not to stare. "Music," she says after the delay.

"Nice," says Farouk.

"You?" she asks.

"Double in math and spatial reasoning. For architecture," he says, then adds, "My parents . . . immigrants, you know, wanted something practical." He lifts his shoulders almost as if in apology. "Anything happening for you yet?" he asks Ara.

Her vacant eyes settle on me. She is beautiful and empty—just the way Chanson Industry PromoTeams like their talent. It's a convenient side effect of the surgery. Sparking all that genius seems to short out other parts of the mind, at least long enough for a PromoTeam to fill you up with everything (besides ability) that will keep you rich and make you famous. If everything goes as planned, once Ara's auditory cortical pathways settle into their new wiring, her brain will be consumed with music. It'll be all she wants to do. In the meantime, while those circuits are getting settled, her PromoTeam will work their tails off to make her into pre-star material: the look, the walk, the talk, the network, the brand. Because as every one of us Persons Of Normal Intelligence knows, you can be the most amazing savant ever to walk the planet, but if you don't have a patron's corporate machine behind you, you might as well be singing to your reflection in the bathroom mirror.

"Don't worry." I rub Ara's shoulder. "It takes time, that's all."

Just then the crowd parts and Rajesh swaggers up. He's decked out. Vertical stripes on his jumpsuit, pulsating char-  
treuse polka dots on his bowtie, hair pumped up almost as  
high as the girls'. And he's trailing a cloud of 'razzi dragonfly  
drones because he's the current boy wonder of the literary  
world. His parents got his ASA in early. He was only fourteen  
when they did it, which can be tricky because as my parents  
found out the hard way with my sister, Alouette, the brain is  
so vulnerable at that age. Yet like everything Raj's family does,  
they hired the best in the world, which is an option when your  
father is a rare earth-mining magnate heir and your mother  
ruled Bollywood for two decades, so money is no question. And  
it paid off. In the two years since his literary ASA, Raj has  
gotten one of the largest publishing contracts in history. Now,  
his patron is about to release the final installment of Raj's  
Captain Happenstance trilogy called *Revenge of the Shadow  
Thieves*, sure to be another worldwide best seller.

"Friends, Romans, and countrymen!" Raj shouts and  
inserts himself into the center of our group, arms around shoul-  
ders, pulling everyone in for a round of photos taken by the  
drones. Girls lean in, boobs pressed forward, butts out, heads  
cocked to the side and huge smiles while the guys lay back, lift  
their chins and purse their lips, slouch to the side as if nothing  
is that important. Party pose, they called it at SCEWL where  
we all perfected it. I slip behind the line to give the others more  
prominent positions because (much to my father's chagrin) I'd  
rather stay behind the scenes. A few seconds later, something  
else catches the attention of the 'razzi and they move en masse  
across the gallery, casting shadows as they pass beneath the  
lights, except for Raj's stalkers, which stay close by.

“What’s this?” Raj shouts as the others sneak peeks at their palms to make sure they were in proximity of his celebrity to make it in the Buzz. Yes, yes, they are worthy now. “The great Arabella is amongst us. Beautiful eagle heroine. Orabilis, I bow to thee in prayer!” He bows deeply as if waiting for applause.

“Easy there.” Elston gives him a playful bump. “The drones are gone and we’re not your adoring fans.”

“Yeah, yeah,” Raj says, beleaguered by our lack of fawning. “Speaking of adoring fans, anybody seen Quinby yet?” He cranes his neck.

Elston lifts her eyes to the ceiling and blows a puff of air into her tower of rainbow curls, which don’t budge. “I’m sure she’s in the middle of the hive, Queen Bee that she is now.”

“Jealous?” Farouk asks.

Elston gives him a look of death. “Hardly,” she snaps, but we all know better. Elston had an art ASA six months ago and while she’s been mad prolific since she woke up, nothing has popped for her yet. She mostly works from photos, zooming in on details of fireworks in night skies or phosphorescence under the sea, then paints over the images in brightly colored squiggles. But what she really loves is distorting videos of the Plebes. Groups running, brawls for food, a protest gone terribly wrong. She takes the footage from security cameras or HandHelds, zooms in close, slows things down, and forces viewers to confront the faces of the masses. I think her work is brilliant, but it doesn’t resonate with most Plute art collectors like Quinby’s ever-repeating images of woodland decomposition does.

I step to Elston’s side and touch her elbow. The bright yellow and orange stripes of her paint job twist around her

upper arm and disappear beneath her steel-blue top. Unlike the other girls wrapped in skin-tight tubes, she favors billowy fabrics that dance around her when she moves. “You’re gorgeous and talented, Elston, and it’ll happen for you, too,” I whisper close.

She sighs, weighty and sad.

Raj steps up. “Cover me,” he says through gritted teeth.

On cue, the whole group huddles close, blocking the circling ’razzi dragonfly drones from view while pressing ExoScreen cams against our thighs so no pix get out.

“Lookie what Papa Raj brought you,” he says and slips a slender silver bottle from his pocket. “My Plebe connection hooked me up with some fine black-market Juse.”

Without hesitation, everyone shoves a glass close to the bottle. Raj tops us all off, then we toast once again. “Down the hatch!” Raj says. In unison we toss back our drinks, smack our lips, and wait for the night to get much more interesting.

## ZIMRI

On stage at Nowhere, under one bright light, sweat pours into my eyes as the music pours out of me. My mother, Rainey, and Dorian's father, Marley, dug this place out of the riverbank before we were born. They made their own music here for years, then abandoned it to the frozards and squimonks when my mother disappeared. I rediscovered it a year ago and have been putting on concerts ever since, but tonight is the first time Dorian's played with me.

Although the space is small and cramped wall-to-wall with black-masked people, it feels like a cathedral to me. Dorian and I go from one song to the next, pushed forward by the backing tracks I prerecorded and his driving beats. When I sing, the crowd moves with me like beads of water drawn together to form a puddle. I tilt left. They tilt left. I bounce up and down and so do they. I lift my arms. Arms go up. They hang on my words, listening to me sing about working Plebes like us, perpetually treading water so we don't drown, a feat my father couldn't manage. The terror and thrill that we could all be

caught at an illegal concert feeds the frenzy from first song to the last. And when the final note reverberates over the crowd, Dorian and I both yell, “Thank you!” then bolt offstage while everybody else streams out the door like floodwater spilling over the riverbank into the night, as black as the masks we all wear to protect our identities.

Dorian and I work quickly to dismantle any evidence of what went on here tonight. We haul the pallets out back. Take apart the lights. Carefully fold up the canvas curtain and put it, along with the ancient equipment, in an alcove my mother so cleverly constructed to hide all of her ramshackle instruments, mixing boards, turntables, laptops, and headphones back in the day. When we’re done, the only things left of this evening are the audio and video recordings that I hold in my hands.

“What will you do with those?” Dorian asks. He slumps against the wall like he just worked a double at the warehouse, his dark skin sheened with sweat beneath bleached blond dreds. But in his shiny silver pants he’s every ounce the rock star.

“I’ll release the audio tomorrow,” I tell him, and stick the little digital recorder in my pocket. “If that’s okay with you.”

“Far be it from me to stop a pirate,” he says with a laugh.

I grin. After my mother left, I took one of her old transmitters to Tati who helped me get it up and running with a few spare parts scavenged from the electronics dump. Tati showed me how to hook up an antenna so I could start my own pirate radio broadcasts. For the first year, I used it only to search for my mother. “Rainey, this is your daughter Zim, come in Rainey. Please come in.” Then I’d sing sad songs that she loved—Sarah



Vaughn, Mavis Staples, Mary J. Blige, Trinity, Libellule—like a siren trying to lure a sailor back to the rocky shore.

One day Marley pulled me aside. He squatted down with his hands on his knees so we were eye to eye. “I heard you on the air,” he told me, which made my cheeks burn red. I hadn’t thought about other people scanning the waves with the black-market receivers they bought from Tati and hid inside their PODs. “You have to stop. You don’t have a license and you’re broadcasting music you don’t own the rights to.”

“I’m just trying to find her,” I told him.

“Honey.” He put his hand on my shoulder, which made me feel small. “If your mother wanted to be found . . .”

I squirmed away. I didn’t need him to finish that sentence but right then and there I knew that the music I’d make had to be for someone other than my mother.

“I just hope we pulled in enough,” I say to Dorian. I never ask for money when I put on a show, but people leave it anyway and since I don’t really need it, I give it to someone who does. “Levon’s son, Luka, is coming home from the MediPlex tomorrow but Levon says the prosthetic leg is terrible. The kid can barely walk.”

“Did they ever catch the person who ran him over?” Dorian asks.

I scoff. “Of course not. Just some Plute plowing down the road out by the river where Levon’s son was riding his bike. At least the guy had the decency to drop the kid at the MediPlex, but then he took off like he’d dumped a half-dead dog.”

Dorian shakes his head, disgusted by the same old story of Plute versus Plebe. “Do we take the money to Levon then?”

"It's already gone," I tell him and he frowns. "Hey," I say. "The less you know about it . . ."

"I get it," he says. "If we never touch the money, no one can say we profited, right?"

I nod. "But don't fool yourself. Even if we don't have cash in hand, what we're doing isn't exactly legal."

He shrugs as if he doesn't care, then points to the video cam in my hand. "What about that?"

I toss it up and down, catching the little orb in my palm where it fits so well. "It didn't work. I checked the laptop but there's nothing on it. I'll ask Tati to look at it the next time I see her."

I look over the empty room. What felt like a sacred space when we were on stage has returned to a small, cramped dug-out with a low ceiling and musty dank air. "Want to get out of here?" I ask.

"Let's go," says Dorian.



Outside by the river, it's a good fifteen degrees cooler, which is nice after the stuffy air of Nowhere. And it smells good, too. Like moss on damp rocks. The moon has come up bright, making the path along the river glow soft yellow. I miss Brie then. She usually waits for me beneath the big willow tree after a show so we can walk home together, but she got demoted back to nights at the warehouse after missing three days of work with the flu last week. Now, I can't even ping her because they block our HandHeld signals while we're on the clock. That's

the hardest part of being on opposite shifts. I've barely talked to my best friend all week!

Dorian picks up his bike, hidden in the reeds. "Want a ride?"

I climb on behind him and balance with my hands on his hips. He's gotten tall and solid, like a sturdy tree. And there's something about the way he holds his shoulders, back and down with his chin up, that hits me in the belly like a pebble in a puddle, sending ripples to the edges of my skin. I shake off that feeling because it's stupid. We've known each other since we were born.

As we ride along the river path, I listen to the squee and squonk of his bike chain, then make those the backbeat to a rhythm I tap on Dorian's hipbones. He keeps the pedals going, perfectly in time to the click of delivery drones taking off every other second from the mammoth Corp X warehouse roof. Squee and squonk and squee and squonk and zoom and zoom. Squee and squonk and squee and squonk and zoom and zoom. Dor adds his bike bell at the end, ting ting. I shoosh my feet in the gravel—shup shup—and he finds a bright screech on his brakes. I match the note, A#, sing a riff of nonsense as we ride along until he hits the brakes hard and I slam into his back.

"What the . . . !" I peel myself away from his sweaty shirt.

"Look at that!" He straddles the bike and points to the sky where a giant bird lifts off from the top of a tree. It glides out over the willows standing along the bank like tired women hanging their heads after a long day at work.

I slide off the back of the bike and hurry to the edge of the path. "Come on!" Dorian drops his bike and we scamper down

a slope to see where the bird has landed. Halfway down, Dorian loses his footing and ends up on his rear, hollering, “Whoa, whoa, whoa,” as he grasps for tree roots to slow himself down. I catch him by the back of the shirt. His arms windmill as he teeters on the edge of the bank.

“Whew, thanks, I almost took the plunge!” He stiffens. “Oh, god, sorry . . . I . . .”

“There!” I point, not interested in his apology for my family history. In the center of the river, the heron tiptoes through the water, silently hunting for its supper. “I haven’t seen one of those in years,” I whisper and plop down on a soft tuft of grass to take off my shoes. I slide my feet into the river. The cool water swirls around my legs and carries away the aches and pains of a full day running in the warehouse plus all that stomping on stage. Curious little frozards nibble on the ends of my wriggling toes, like tiny kisses from my father sending his love up from the depths. *Hi, Papa*, I say inside my head, but I don’t cry anymore when I’m here. It’s been five years since he took the plunge.

“Nonda told me that when she was a kid, there were creatures out here that we don’t have anymore,” I say to Dorian. “Things like foxes and beavers. Or separate species, like there were coyotes and wolves or squirrels and chipmunks. Those were all different things before Corp X came along and everything got squished together.”

“I think your Nonda makes things up.” Dorian squats beside me. In the dusky light, with a stick in his hands, he looks more like the kid I remember from when we were little and everybody played together in the Youth Activity & Recreation Domain, not the person he’s become, tall and lanky, all arms

and legs, his face rearranging itself into an adult version of himself. When he turned fifteen, he got a job on the warehouse box-packing line because he tested high for spatial reasoning skills.

I sing a song about an old man river and kick arcs of water in the air. I'm still jacked up from the show and can't quite settle my brain or stop the adrenaline pumping through my body. I feel like grabbing the heron and twirling around, singing at the top of my lungs, dancing across the riverbank, climbing trees, swinging on the moon. "I wish I could perform every night!" I say.

"Every night?" says Dorian. "Sounds exhausting."

"Not to me." I stare out at the swirling water below, always moving forward, and I imagine a life on the road like the old-time musicians on tour—going from town to town, a different venue every night. "Making music makes me happier than anything else in life," I say, my dreams clouding up my voice. "You can't touch it or live inside of it. Music can't protect you from the wind or rain. It's not like we can eat it or drink it. But if I suddenly had no music in my life, I think that I might die."

"You'd die?" Dorian teases.

"Shut up," I say and bump his shoulder with mine.

"Yeah, well, you better be careful, Zimri Robinson," Dorian warns. "If you get caught, you know what happens." He presses his fingers into my temples. "Bzzzt!" he says. "They'll zap your brain!"

I knock his hand away. "Nonda says I was born in the wrong era. Just like my mom."

"Or maybe we were born on the wrong side of the river."

Dorian tosses his stick. It makes a gentle splash that scares the heron into flight.

*Bye bye birdie*, I sing inside my head as we both look out across the wide, dark expanse of water to the road on the other side. The road that leads out. My father hated being a warehouse picker. Sucked his soul clean dry. It gets to some people—packing up boxes of things we’ll never own to send off to the Plutes in the City who expect everything dropped into their delivery chutes at the push of a button. Geographically, we aren’t far from the City, but the distance between here and there is enormous for Plebes like us, which is why my father only made it to the middle of the river. My mother, though, got out.

“I still can’t believe you asked me to play tonight,” Dorian says. “What if I’d been terrible?”

“Are you kidding?” I pull my legs out of the water and dry them with my socks. “You’ve been playing drums since you could walk.” I reach up for his hand. “You’re Marley’s son, after all.”

Our parents taught us a history of the world in music. From blues to jazz to rock to hip-hop and rap, from trance to dance and dub, from calypso to ska to reggae, through punk and emo and tech, from blather to echo and Sparkle Jam. They claimed music went bad after the 2065 pay-for-play technology went into effect. And who could blame them? I think people of their generation lost the most. One minute nearly all music was at their fingertips; the next, listeners couldn’t own any recordings. Music lovers like them must have felt bereft.

Dorian pulls me to stand and leans in closer so our heads nearly touch. I can smell the river on his skin and see the

moisture above his top lip. “Why’d you ask me to play tonight? Why now?”

I swallow hard because I don’t have a good answer. I’ve been watching him at the warehouse lately, curious about who he’s become. “I just thought it would be more fun with another person.” I hear my voice go shaky, which seems odd—not to mention embarrassing. My palm is sweaty in his grip and my body tingles and feels warm at the same time.

Then his arm is around my shoulder. Resting there like it belongs, and I feel something shift inside of me. Like a switch gets flipped and suddenly I’m not standing here with somebody I grew up beside but with someone new and undiscovered.

The peepers and crickets and whippoorwills are in full chorus. A breeze kicks up, bringing along the smells of mucky water, green leaves, and sweet blossoms. “Have you ever heard anything so beautiful?” I whisper.

Dorian inhales deeply. I feel the heat coming off of his body, wrapping itself around my skin. “Yes,” he says. I hear him swallow, lick his lips. Then he says, “You singing.”

He scoops me in a half-circle toward him so we’re facing one another. I can’t look at his face so I stare at his arms. The vein on his bicep pulses. I press my hand against his chest. His heart pounds beneath my palm.

“Bm-bm, bm-bm,” I say, echoing his rhythm. My hands creep up to his shoulders. They are safe and sturdy, like branches I could climb. His Adam’s apple bobs. I lean in and inhale the scent of his neck. Then he pulls back and places one hand gently under my chin. Our eyes meet, our lips press together. For a moment, I’m fuzzy about where my body ends,

the same way I feel when I get sucked into a song. But Dorian drops his arm and steps back quickly.

“Oh!” I press two fingers against my tingling lips.

“Someone’s coming,” he says and wipes the back of his hand across his mouth.

I hear the squeak of another bike on the river path behind us.

“Dorian?” someone calls. “That you?”

“Is that your dad?” I ask, my stomach in a knot.

Dorian grimaces when Marley pulls up beside us. His long braids are tucked up under a knit cap he’s worn ever since I’ve known him.

“Were you out looking for me?” Dorian asks his dad. “I told you I’d be late.”

“You forgot to mention where you’d be.” Marley’s voice is hard. “I overheard some kids at the warehouse say there was a show out at Nowhere tonight. You wouldn’t know anything about that, now would you?”

My heart leaps into my throat. “I should get home.” I tiptoe backward away from them. “I haven’t seen Nonda since this morning. She might be worried. Sometimes she forgets . . .”

“We’ll walk you,” Marley says.

“That’s okay,” I tell him. “I’ll be fine.”

“No,” says Marley. “I want to talk to you. Both of you. And this concerns Nonda, too.”

I grip the recordings in my pocket and consider tossing them into the river like stones, but I don’t. Instead, I walk far apart from Dorian, with Marley in between, calculating the hours until I can release the songs.



## ORPHEUS

“You don’t have to stay with me,” Arabella says after the others go in search of the obligatory mingle to up their Buzz ratings and make their PromoTeams happy. But I stick with her in an out-of-the way corner of the gallery beneath Quinby’s painting of giant pill bugs on moldering orange and brown oak leaves.

“Good for my cred to be seen with you,” I say, but we both knew it’s a lie—she’s not established in the Buzz quite yet. Truthfully, I feel protective of Ara. She seems addled and easily confused, especially with the Juse now in her system, so I want to stay close.

Everybody says we make the perfect pair but our timing’s always been off. She liked me last year when I was dating Europa Al-Asad. By the time Europa and I broke up, Ara was with Eleven Beckham. They broke up when he was recruited to play midfield for PetroChina. We got together for a minute right before her surgery a month ago and since then she’s

been recovering. Maybe now that things are getting back to normal we'll finally figure out what's between us.

"So . . ." she says, her words a little slurry from the Juse. "Does your father own my brain now?" She laughs and taps the side of her head.

"Does he own your brain?" I snort. Her hair is newly gold with tiny braids woven into intricate paths. I have an urge to follow one with my finger. "Your whole entire brain?"

"Don't make fun of me!" she whines. "I don't really understand the whole patenting and copyright thing."

"Don't freak out," I say and give her a quick hug, drawing in her smell—herbal and fresh like a newly planted garden. "Here's how it works. Chanson Industries bought the rights to any music your brain creates, just like Quinby's patron owns her paintings, and Rajesh's patron owns his books. You get a cut of the profits from all your songs that Chanson streams or the concerts they set up, or any LiveStreams that you do. Plus your PromoTeams will keep you in the Buzz. It's all a big machine," I tell her.

"Speaking of which," she says, "I'm supposed to get vid or pix into the Buzz of me with Quinby. You know, the phantom chatterbox. Pre-launch stuff. Blah ditty blah blah."

"Is that going to be your first hit single, 'Blah Ditty Blah Blah'?" I ask and laugh way too hard at my own dumb joke. Raj's Juse has definitely hit.

She tries to smile, but I see tears brim on her blinged-out eyes. "Hey," I say and reach out to comfort her, but then the shiny baubles embedded on the end of each lash mesmerize my fuzzy brain. "Must be hard to blink with all that weight."

I stare at her for another second, cocking my head from left to right. “Wait a sec. You look different.”

“Different good or different bad?” She self-consciously pats the swirling structure on her head.

I get up closer to her face to study her. “It’s your eyes, isn’t it? They’re bigger or something?”

“Double eyelid surgery.” Ara bats her lashes, which makes the tears roll down her cheeks. She carefully wipes them away. “Makes them bigger. Less Asian-y.”

“I thought Asian-y was good for marketing.”

“Except in the eyes,” says Ara. “Or so my PromoTeam says.”

“They said that? Ugh. Who’d you get assigned to?”

Again, the hesitation. Like she knows but can’t quite pull the info from the folds of her mind. “Piper,” she says finally. “Piper McLeo.”

“Actually, she’s good. Knows what she’s talking about,” I tell her with a sigh. “She’s an old family friend, you know.”

Ara smirks. “Who in the music industry is not a friend of your family?”

“All of my dad’s enemies,” I say and we both dissolve into Juse-infused giggles even though it’s definitely not funny. Ara nearly doubles over in hysterics. She grips my arm for support but then she starts to slump. I grab her beneath the armpits and shuffle her toward the wall to prop her up. She slings her hands onto my shoulders.

“Am I still beautiful?” she asks with her face close to mine.

“Of course,” I tell her. Then we’re nose to nose, lips quivering as we start to kiss, but Ara pulls away.

“Sorry, sorry, sorry,” she mutters and looks around, hoping

none of that was caught by a 'razzi drone, since her contract specifically states that all public romantic ties must be pre-approved by the PromoTeam.

"No, I'm sorry," I tell her. "I should know better." I step back and take a breath to regroup. "Okay, look. Here's what we're going to do. I'll help you get your photo op with Quinby and then you leave with me, deal?"

"Orpheus," she says, straightening her dress. "If you can work that miracle, I'll go anywhere with you." She gives me a teasing smile—a glimmer of the old Arabella showing through. Both our carapaces glow.

I lead her through the crowd by the wrist. She hangs back, loose-limbed and lithe, waving to people and flashing smiles as we pass. SCEWL does a good job preparing Plute kids so that when we wake up from our ASAs we already have some skills, and everything's coming back to Ara. Her walk fools the 'razzi into thinking she's someone special. They send her image into the algorithm again and again, upping her chances of getting in the Buzz tonight.

I spot Quinby, literally on a pedestal, at the front of the gallery. She's posing for pix, dolled up beyond belief. Her hair is Marie Antoinette-worthy, piled high in dark brown twists fashioned to look like twigs with fake hummingbirds and butterflies woven in. The whole tree motif is carried throughout her look. Rather than paint her, her stylists have polished her nut-brown skin to a high sheen, and draped her body in silky shades of green to match her nearly neon eyes.

"Brilliant branding," Ara mutters with an eyebrow cocked.

"Quin!" I call up to her. "Quinbo!" When she doesn't

answer I take a deep breath and yell, “Hey, Q-Bert!” That gets her attention.

She squats with knees together at the edge of the pedestal and breaks into a smile. “Orphie! Don’t call me that here,” she says, but she’s laughing along with me. I wonder if Raj has slipped her something, too.

“Oh, sorry, Q-Bert! You’re stunning, by the way.” I slouch against the pedestal base. “Q’s mom and mine used to be best buds,” I tell Arabella and ignore the flash of pity across Quinby’s face when I say *used to be*.

“I’ve known this maggot since we were born,” she says.

“Hey, do a favor?” I tug Ara closer. “My lovely friend needs a byte on the Buzz.”

“Arabella! Oh my god! Is that you? I heard you were back!” Quinby squeals in that way girls have of being terribly over-excited to see one another, especially when they don’t really care that much. But Q is a good sport and she knows the game. “Your look is so *snazbags!*” She reaches out and leads Ara around the back of the pedestal to the steps. “Come on up here, girl.”

As soon as they’re together, arms entwined like they’re the best of friends, FingerCams up high to generate their own stream of pix, the platform rotates and the ’razzi drones zoom over. The buzzing cloud of dragonflies hover near the Girl-of-the-Moment and the One-in-Waiting taking a spin on the pedestal of fleeting fame. Piper will send Ara on hundreds of these ops before she drops a single song so by the time she debuts, she’ll have made her way into the public psyche like a termite boring into wood. The Plutes will want her on their ticket

dockets at my father's arenas and Plebes will pay for playing her songs whether they're good or not.

While I'm watching them, a girl walks up. She doesn't look like anybody else at the gallery. No over-the-top hair, no paint job, no makeup. Just plain, in baggy pants and a fading blond ponytail. When I look at her more carefully though, I see that she's older than me but still quite pretty, with a broad forehead, gray-green eyes, and a slightly upturned nose. I glance down for a peek at her carapace, but oddly, both of her hands are bare.

"Orpheus?" she asks and eyes me cautiously.

"Yes," I say. "Do we know each other?"

"My name is Calliope. I was in your sister's class at SCEWL, before . . ." She stops and stands awkwardly. "And your father used to be my patron."

"Oh." I step back, wondering if she's a nutjob. "He's patron for a lot of people."

Her eyes flash dark and broody like the sky before a storm. "I'm the one suing him."

"You'll have to be more specific," I tell her with a snort. Definitely a nutjob. Who else would show up at a gallery opening dressed like a Plebe? "There are at least fifty people suing my father on any given day."

Calliope's jaw drops. She steps forward, pinning me between her body and the wall. "Do you know what it's like to have music take over your brain? It never stops. It's like there's a band inside your mind and the band keeps playing on and on and on." She grabs the sides of her head.

"Congratulations," I say sarcastically. "Sounds like your ASA was a success!"

"I was the first," she says. "Did you know that? And your father paraded me around as proof for Plutes of what was possible for their kids. He has it all worked out, doesn't he?" She keeps herself positioned between the pedestal and me so I can't get past. "Who needs years of expensive private schools, backroom deals, and corporate ladders to climb when you can buy your kid an Acquired Savant Ability surgery and voilà—she's a genius."

I laugh at her. "And what's so bad about that?" I ask, even though I suspect it's horrifying. I see the way my friends change. How obsessed they become with their vocation, unable to enjoy most of life.

"Nothing," she says. "Except that your father is a liar. He never intended to let me have a career. He sold my contract out from under me along with hundreds of others who'd signed with him. Then he used that money to put the other patrons out of business so he could claw his way to the top and we were left with nothing."

"Hey," I say, hands up as if in surrender. "That's business."

"No!" She stamps her foot in my direction. "It was my LIFE! The only job I could get after that was as a warehouse picker. It took me years to save enough money so I could have the reversal surgery and not be haunted by music all the time."

"Look," I say, softer now. "I'm sorry that happened to you, but it's got nothing to do with me."

"Oh, it's got everything to do with you, Orpheus," she hisses. "You haven't gotten an ASA yet and who could blame you after what happened to your sister?"

The hair on the back of my neck bristles. I step toe to

toe with this crazy woman. “Don’t bring my sister into this,” I warn and think of beautiful Alouette, brain wasted, perpetually lying in the MediPlex since her botched surgery ten years ago.

“Why haven’t you done it yet?” she asks. “You’re nearly seventeen. You know he won’t hand over the company to you unless you get the surgery. But I know you have your doubts.”

I press my back against the wall, wondering how she knows so much about me.

She moves closer. In the bright lights of the gallery she appears otherworldly, as if she’s stepped out of the past to warn me about the future. “You’re just a pawn in your father’s game. He’ll use you like he used your mother and your sister. He’ll claim everything he does is for his family’s sake, but really that’s just a smoke screen to hide his greed.”

“Leave my family out of this!” I push past her but she latches on to me.

“Consider this fair warning,” she says into my ear. “I’m only the first person in a long line who’ll sue him over sold contracts and botched reversal ASAs. Think of me as the flood-gate opening. Once we expose what’s really going on, the system will begin to crumble.”

I turn and look at her but I can’t find any words.

“Join us!” she says. “Imagine the message it would send if Harold Chanson’s own son questioned the system. Do it for your sister. You owe her that!”

Just then, the pedestal stops and the ’razzi drones fly off. As Ara comes down the steps, I grab her arm. “Come on. I need to get out of here. Now.”

Ara and I make our escape through a side door of the



gallery to avoid the MajorDoormo announcing our departure. Outside, in the loading zone, cars zip in and out. Since it's after nine o'clock, the Distract is lit up like midday with LED displays on every building surface, but without my EarBug, none of the ads can talk to me directly. Above us, a twenty-foot tall Raj, arm-in-arm with Quinby, flashes across the side of the gallery building. Overhead, a hologram of Geoff Joffrey dances across the rooftops. He does a trademark spin, one arm up, then points at all the little people, teeming like ants following chemical trails from hot spot to hot spot, down below.

"Are you okay?" Ara asks, still flushed from her brush with the Buzz.

"Yeah, fine," I tell her, but it's not true.

"What'd that girl want?"

My Cicada pulls up in front of us. The topside doors open like wings. I glance over my shoulder, making sure Calliope isn't following us. "For me to convince my father to restart her career," I lie as we climb inside. "Happens all the time."

"What a pain," Ara says with an indifferent shrug. "So, what should we do now? Where should we be seen?"

She points at the WindScreen lit up with all the hottest destinations for us to hit tonight.

"The end of the Geoff Joffrey concert at your dad's arena? The first movie from Rajesh's Captain Happenstance trilogy is still playing. Have you seen it yet? Oh, look!"

She touches a pix of a cat in a tux to pull up info on a retrospective called *U Must B Kitten Me*.

"Do you remember that girl Lynna Orkowski from SCEWL? I heard her ASA didn't fully take and now she's totally obsessed with cats. She draws cats, paints cats, makes tiny outfits just

for cats.” Suddenly Ara looks horrified. “Oh, god!” she says. “What if that happens to me?”

“Can we just get the hell out of here?” I ask, then tell my car’s V2V NaviSystem to take us home. “I can’t handle any more *sosh* tonight.” I reach across Ara and open the glove box for my own silver flask.

“Is that a receiver?” She points at a black device tucked behind the flask.

I nod. “I got it from the Plebe Rajesh knows who sells the Juse.” I take a swig. I need another hit after that conversation with Calliope. I know it’s dumb to let her spook me. She’s just a brain activist with a vendetta against my father. But none of them have ever targeted me. Plus she knew so much about the situation—my parents’ divorce that’s lingered in the courts for years and my doubts about having an ASA. I can’t help but wonder where she’s getting her information and it’s freaking me out.

“Wouldn’t your dad kill you if he finds out you listen to pirate radio?” Ara asks and takes the flask from me.

“Market research,” I joke and feel myself begin to relax as the Juse seeps into my bloodstream.

Since the traffic is slow on the ground, the Cicada prepares to lift off and bypass the congestion. “Windows,” I command. The screens become transparent so we can see outside. I don’t like the SkyPath, yet. It’s still too new. Of course, my father insisted he be one of the first to have access to that space when it opened six months earlier, but the whole thing feels clunky to me. The car rumbles as the wings unfold, the air pressure in the vehicle changes too abruptly when we rise up, and there’s a screechy sound as the wheels retract. I look out at the four

other new-model Cicadas that form our self-navigating platoon.

“What do you listen to on it?” Ara asks, still poking at the receiver.

“You can find all kinds of interesting stuff on the waves.” I take it out and turn it on. “Sometimes it’s religious fanatics from their bunkers in the wastelands predicting the end of the world as we know it. Or oddballs spouting anticorporate philosophy and saying they want a revolution.”

“Why?” she asks.

I shrug. “Well, you know, they all want to change the world, I guess.”

“As if,” she says, then she leans in close and whispers, “Do you ever hear illegal music?”

“Sometimes you can find a station,” I say, not mentioning that most nights I spend hours surfing the waves, listening to tunes, imagining how I would rearrange the melodies and instruments to give songs a whole different feel. “But my dad’s people catch on pretty quick and jam the signal. Not that it matters. The pirates are smart. They move around and find other waves.”

Tonight the stations are crackly and hollow-sounding with all the interference from the Distract, but we catch a few snippets here and there from the handful of audio news streams that cover everything substantive the Buzz would never run.

*Factory workers riot over unsanitary conditions.*

*A warehouse fire in India kills four pickers and destroys three million dollars worth of merchandise.*

*Corporation XianJai says it's considering automating all facilities by 2093.*

*The Kardashians SCEWL for Future Celebrities posted record-high earnings today.*

"That's where we went, right?" Ara asks, smiling at the memories coming back.

"'Give 'em to us and they'll be smart enough to know better when they graduate,'" I quote the SCEWL's motto, and we both laugh until the next headline hits.

*Bad day for Chanson Industries. Calliope Bontempi filed suit against Harold Chanson for personal and property damages following the sale of her music contract and a reversal ASA. . . .*

"That's the crazy girl who cornered me in the gallery," I tell Ara.

*. . . And an unidentified group momentarily hijacked the LiveStream of the Geoff Joffrey concert. . . .*

"Oh god," I groan. "My dad's going to be in a foul mood tonight!" I reach to change the channel, but Ara stops me.

"No wait, I want to hear this," she says.

I take another long drink from the flask.

*Harold Chanson is widely credited with changing the music industry by patenting the first Acquired Savant*

*Ability surgery, known as an ASA, that rewires the auditory cortical region of the brain to induce musical genius. Since then, other companies have patented similar procedures for savant abilities in different regions of the brain.*

*Chanson went on to become one of the most successful music patrons in the world by introducing pay-for-play streaming technology in 2065 that prohibits consumers from downloading and owning individual songs.*

*In her complaint, Ms. Bontempi claims she underwent a reversal ASA (a procedure for which Chanson Industries also holds the patent) that left her with acquired amusia. "I can no longer sing, hum, or whistle. I cannot read or write music, recognize songs I once knew, or play any of the instruments I so dearly loved. My ability to make a living as a musician was stolen by Harold Chanson when he did not honor my contract, and now my ability to derive any pleasure from music has been erased from my mind by him as well."*

"Enough!" I turn off the receiver. "I can't stand to hear about another person whose life was ruined by my father."

"That's cold." Ara leans away.

"Oh, come on! You know how this goes," I grumble at her. "Art is a cutthroat business and not everybody makes it. Calliope's career failed and now she's bitter. Next she'll say my father is evil and that art should belong to everybody."

The Juse must have hit Ara hard because this makes her laugh and since she's laughing, I start laughing, too. We howl and slap our knees.

Finally, Ara calms down enough to say, "What a stupid idea. Everybody knows art belongs to the elite."

## ZIMRI

When Marley, Dorian, and I get to my POD, the lights are off and the blinds are down.

“Nonda?” I call. “You here? We have visitors.” When she doesn’t answer, I tiptoe in. My shoulder brushes against one of my father’s paintings of the river, knocking it askew.

“Could she be asleep?” Dorian asks, clearly hoping for a way out of the awkward situation.

“It’s not that late,” Marley assures us.

I command the lights on low and see two pots on the stove. No freeze-dried, premade dinners in our house. Nonda always cooks. The smoky scent of beans and greens still hangs in the air. But the main living space is empty and her sleeping unit is retracted into the wall.

“Maybe she went out?” Dorian says. “We could come back another time.”

Marley, Dorian, and I are all startled, then we laugh nervously when we hear the whoosh of the toilet before the

bathroom door slides open and there's Nonda squinting into the bright light. "Rainey?" she calls. "That you?"

I glance over my shoulder at Marley. He knits his eyebrows, same as me. It's weird hearing Nonda call for my mom. "It's me, Nonda. It's Zim."

Nonda looks sleepy and confused. "Oh," she says and shuffles by. I notice her clothes are wrinkled and disheveled. Her pants are dirty at the knees.

"Sorry to barge in on you like this, Layla." Marley steps forward with his arms open for a hug. "It's late and—"

"You hungry, Linus?" she says and Marley visibly blanches. His eyes cut to the artwork hung all over our walls. It's been years since anyone mistook him for my father. "I went to the river today and picked some greens," she says.

"Is that why your pants are dirty?" I ask, following Nonda closely like a bloodhound sniffing for the trail of her day. "Because you were out picking? Or did you fall?"

Nonda looks down at herself. "Oh my," she says. "I am a mess!" She rubs at the smudges on her clothes. "Picking is messy business, but you know how your daddy loves them greens. Don't you? I got some watercress for your supper."

"I know it's been a while." Marley puts his hand on her shoulder and looks her squarely in the face. "But I'm not Linus. I'm Marley. Remember me?"

Nonda studies him then blinks as if she's concentrating. "Goodness me, so silly. I'm a tired old woman." She laughs and pats his arm then moves on. "Of course you're not Linus. He's long gone. You all hungry?" she says and opens one of the pots on the stove.



Marley starts to say no but Dorian and I jump in with a resounding, “Yes!”

“Good!” says Nonda and gets a spoon. “And who’s this?” she asks, pointing at Dorian.

“That’s my boy,” Marley says.

“Nice to meet you . . . again, ma’am.” Dorian offers his hand.

“I remember you and Zimri running around in diapers,” says Nonda, which makes both of us blush.

“The reason I wanted to talk with you,” Marley says, but Nonda isn’t listening.

She ladles out great heaps of beans and greens into two bowls while talking nonstop. “Your parents were a heap of trouble when they were young,” she tells us. I press my lips together so I won’t laugh. “Always into mischief down by the river. That was before Corp X started that sham of a so-called education system. Zimri, set the table.”

I push the button so the table unfolds from the wall. “You mean SQEWL?”

“Hmph,” says Nonda, hands on hips. “Special Quality Education for Workforce Life, my butt! Brought in a bunch of RoboNannies to keep you kids on lockdown while we worked. Took the cost right out of our COYN. No art. No music. A travesty, if you ask me!”

Nonda’s rant about SQEWL is a familiar one, so I’m glad when Dorian interrupts. “What kind of things did you do down by the river?” he asks his dad as we slide onto the benches across from one another, but Marley doesn’t answer.

“Oh, I can tell you stories!” Nonda grins as she sets down

steaming bowls in front of us. “Once Marley and Rainey made a boat. Decided they were going to leave.”

Dorian and I snicker. “Where were you going to go, Dad?”

“I don’t remember,” Marley mumbles.

“I do,” Nonda says haughtily. “Going to the City to become famous.”

“Famous doing what?” I ask between bites, even though I already know.

Nonda looks at Marley but he stares at the floor and mutters, “Music.” Then he adds, “That was before those genius surgeries and pay-for-play laws and patrons owning musicians. . . .”

“I never did understand how one person could own all the music.” Nonda settles on the bench beside me. “Seems like a bunch of crap to me.”

Dorian and I giggle. Nonda’s always a straight shooter.

“That’s not how it works.” Marley slides in next to Dorian. “Artists are like professional athletes and patrons are like team owners. They sign contracts with artists then own the copyright to all their work. In music they make money off of concerts, LiveStream vids, and audio streaming, which is why you can’t own any music like you could back in the day. Just download a song and it was yours to keep and play anytime you wanted. Nowadays, the more money a song makes, the higher it moves up the Stream, the more you hear it. Ugh. Same thing over and over. Whatever the masses like best. You try to pull up an old song and they stick it to you big-time with a premium!” He shakes his head, disgusted.

“That didn’t stop your mama, did it, Zimri?” says Nonda. “No, sir. *Oh*, Rainey would say, *I don’t believe in none of that*

*copyright malarkey. Nobody can own ideas or art.* I told her, ‘You better stop messing around with that music. Mixing it all up and saying that it’s your own. Putting on shows and expecting people to pay you.’”

“Tati had a hand in that, too,” Marley says and sniffs. “She figured out how to hack the HandHelds so folks could download Rainey’s songs, which was dumb since she sampled lots of tunes for remixes.”

“The fat cats in the City didn’t like that, did they?” Nonda asks. Marley shakes his head. “And you know what happened to your mama when she got caught.”

Beans stick in my throat. The audio and video recorders feel heavy in my pocket.

“They said she owed money for all the music she stole and if she couldn’t pay it back, she’d go off to jail and earn them their money.” Nonda shakes her head. “Mm-mm-mm. She always was a stubborn one. She said, ‘I’d just be trading one prison life at the warehouse for another in the jail.’”

“Like the old song said,” Marley adds, “*one chain makes a prison.*”

Nonda laughs. “I think you got that wrong. It’s the other way around—*one chain don’t make no prison,*” Nonda sings. “And Rainey had more than one chain.”

I swallow hard, forcing the mush down. We haven’t heard from my mother in years. Truth is, we don’t even know if she’s still alive.

“But you.” Nonda turns to Marley. “You had a good woman. She kept you on track, didn’t she?”

“Yes, ma’am,” Marley whispers. He keeps his eyes on his hands, which are folded tightly between his knees.

"After Rainey was arrested, you stopped."

I watch Marley carefully, but he won't meet my eyes.

"I promised my wife," he says.

"Whatever happened to her?" Nonda asks. "You two split up?"

"No, she passed a few years ago," Marley says. "Cancer."

Nonda sighs. "So many losses." She reaches across the table and pats his hand. "I'm sorry. She was a nice gal, your wife."

Marley nods while Dorian and I lock eyes. We've never talked about the fact that neither of us have mothers anymore. I suppose because his mom had no choice when it was her time to go, but mine chose to leave me behind, and those are two very different things.

"You raised up this fine boy." Nonda pokes Dorian's arm. "Good thing these young ones aren't so foolish nowadays." She looks straight at me. "You saw what problems your mother caused. That rat Medgers coming around, harassing me. So let me ask you this, Zimri Robinson." She folds her hands and leans in close to me. "You'd never do such a thing as make music, would you?"

Dorian and I stare at our bowls, not daring to make eye contact anymore.

"Would you?" she presses and leans in closer. "Because you know what happens if you do and you get caught?"

I'm silent, sweating, afraid she'll put her hand on my leg and ask me what's inside my pocket.

"They'll zap your brain," Nonda says. "Turn you into a blathering idiot. So I'll ask you one more time." She pauses, just long enough to really make us sweat. "You making music?"

Without looking at her I mumble, “No, ma’am.”

“Good!” She slaps the table, which makes us jump. Slowly she rises from the bench, her knees creaking. “Now what did you want to discuss?” she asks Marley.

He’s been kowtowed and it’s no surprise. Nonda has that effect on people. “Your mother . . .” he starts to say to me and then trails off.

“What about her?” I stare at Marley, daring him to look at me but he won’t.

Most of my memories of my mother are caught up in song. I remember singing together while she gave me a bath, her showing me how to play the ukulele, both of us humming while she made us breakfast. I have a few murky memories of playing with Dorian at Nowhere while Mom and Marley jammed. When I uncovered recordings of her old music, both what she listened to and the music that she made, I felt like I knew her better. Heavy, thumping beats that hit you in the gut and songs that sounded happy but with lyrics that were raw. Sometimes, I think my music sounds like hers—as if there could be a genetic link for music like the ones for the texture of my hair and the gap between my teeth that came directly from Nonda to my mother then to me. But there’s a major difference between us. I make up my own songs and don’t sell them. My mother appropriated other people’s music to make a profit.

I continue staring at Marley. I don’t see him very often anymore, but when I do, I’m always shocked at how old he’s become. Something about how his face is shrinking in on itself and his hair is thinning and his eyes are losing some of their

brightness. My mother would be pushing fifty now as well. “She wouldn’t want you to . . .” Marley says and again he can’t finish.

I shake my head. “She left,” I tell him. “She doesn’t get a say about what I do.”